JACK RAMSAY

The Rage

SPHERE

The chilling rabies novel that could become tomorrow's terrifying headlines!

RABIES IS A KILLER!

The virus travels through the body by way of the nervous system until it reaches the brain, where it multiplies and travels outwards again, causing inflammation of the brain and destruction of the nerve cells.
The initial symptoms are fever, headache, anorexia, nausea, malaise, sore throat, drowsiness, insomnia, irritability and restlessness.
In the 'furious' stage, the voice changes in pitch and there are painful muscular spasms when the patient attempts to eat or drink. The sound or even the mention of water will bring on muscular spasm. The patient will die during one of the spasms or the disease will progress towards the 'dumb' stage with ascending paralysis until death.

THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN DO TO EASE THE SUFFERING

The Rage

JACK RAMSAY

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CHAPTER ONE

The old man slept that night as he always had, on his back, his arms folded across his chest, his left leg crossed over his right. The ragged groundsheet kept his spine almost free of the damp; a cocoon of coats and jackets, bundled around him, retained enough body heat to let him rest undisturbed; and his sou'wester, pulled down almost to his chin, shielded his face from the wind so that any rain in the night would moisten only his mouth and this was not enough to bother him.

But the time had come to look for shelter. He had wakened that morning with frost on his beard and his last thought that night before he slept had been that he needed a roof for the winter. Even the dog had deserted him. It had been following him for a week, sleeping at his shoulder. But that night it had found shelter in the roots of a tree trunk some fifty metres away.

At first when he awoke in the dark with the sharp feet nudging him, he assumed it was the dog on the prowl. He waited until it had clambered onto his chest before he opened his eyes. Under the brim of his hat he saw the face of a fox and he thought he could feel the heat of its breath on his face.

For a moment he did not move. The first blink of surprise faded and he smiled. The old man had no fear of foxes.

Slowly he raised one hand and pushed back his hat. As he moved, the fox staggered backwards and sat down abruptly on the old man's stomach, staring at him bright-eyed. He smiled and opened his mouth to croon something soothing to the animal. It cocked an ear and leapt at him,

snapping the small, sharp fangs into his lower lip, the teeth meeting through the flesh and holding. The old man screamed as the fox pulled backwards, dragging him upwards into a crouch. It tried to jump, shaking its head and twisting its body, its full weight tearing at his mouth, whipping its head from side to side, attempting to shake the life out of him as if he were no more than a rat.

He screamed again and the dog hit the fox from behind, hard on the rump, so that it released its grip and tumbled to the ground, the dog on top, searching for its throat but missing and losing its footing on the wet leaves. Briefly both animals fought for balance; the fox was faster to its feet, lunging at the dog, finding an ear and ripping it before scampering into the bracken with the dog in close pursuit.

The old man sat up and tried to shout for the dog but there was too much blood in his mouth. Gently he pressed the torn lip against his gum, closed his eyes and prayed it would hold, pleading silently that the flesh wouldn't come away in his hand.

It took the virus a month to reach the old man's brain. For two weeks it lay dormant in his blood stream as he wandered through the forest. He had made a rough poultice of leaf mould and dock leaves, tied in a handkerchief and bound tightly round his mouth. He wandered aimlessly for a week unable to eat or drink and when he slept he moaned quietly, sometimes waking in the night and uttering muffled screams. At first he had tried to look for the dog but it had gone and he soon forgot about it. On the third day, when the pain was at its worst and he was vomiting blood, he considered finding a doctor but he dismissed the idea almost immediately; he had done without human company for as long as he could remember and his pride would not permit him to seek help now.

In the third week the virus began to move through his

body, travelling from the bloodstream into the nerves of the throat and jaw towards the spinal column and up to the base of the skull. When the first shudders arrived, the old man thought it was merely hunger. When he became irritable and his throat ached, he assumed it was just the weather, but when the virus reached his brain and the inflammation began, he became afraid and began to run, trying to escape from himself, heedless of the bracken and the nettles which tore at his clothes.

By the time the convulsions overtook him, he could run no further and when the gendarmes found him crouched at the verge of the autoroute into Paris, he was tearing with his fingers at his torn mouth and dribbling down his chin. He didn't intend to fight. He wanted to go peaceably but the virus sent another shudder down his spine, arching his back, so that the big gendarme thought he was getting nasty and cuffed him hard until the shaking stopped and they could carry him into the van.

The old man lived in the hospital for three days and, in that time, he was visited by six groups of students. When the ward sister rebuked the consultant in charge for his apparent insensitivity, she was rebuked; this was the first case since 1924, said the doctor, and presented a unique opportunity to view the symptoms at first hand.

Twice a day the students were taken to the door of the old man's room and each time the consultant explained that he was being kept in isolation because the nature of the disease made the patient a tragic sight for others to contemplate. He spoke softly and clinically with no apparent trace of emotion: 'The man is aged around sixty and has no name that we know of. He was bitten on the lower lip by a fox one month ago and is now suffering from what is termed "furious" rabies. There is nothing we can do but attempt to ease his suffering.'

As he talked, the students took notes.

'. . . the virus travels through the body by way of the nervous system until it reaches the brain, where it multiplies and travels outwards again, causing inflammation of the brain and destruction of the nerve cells.

'. . . the initial symptoms are fever, headache, anorexia, nausea, malaise, sore throat, drowsiness, insomnia, irritability and restlessness.

'. . . in the furious stage, the voice changes in pitch and there are painful muscular spasms when the patient attempts to eat or drink.'

The doctor paused: 'You will notice when we go in that the reflexes are absent and the pupils dilated. There is an inability to close the eyes and the patient suffers from constant erection and penile pain. The sound or even the mention of water will bring on muscular spasm.'

On one occasion, at this point, a young man who was unknown to the others, muttered 'Hydrophobia.' And the doctor nodded before continuing: 'The patient will die during one of the spasms or the disease will progress towards the "dumb" stage with ascending paralysis until death.' He stopped talking, his hand on the doorknob, listening to a strange high-pitched howling noise from inside. 'Prepare yourselves,' he said softly. 'This will be a very unpleasant experience. And please say nothing. The man is perfectly lucid. There is no merciful escape into unconsciousness for this unfortunate creature.'

They trooped inside, in single file, and some of them could not look at the old man. He sat up, his back bent into a crouch, saliva dripping from his chin; two male nurses were holding him and as he stared at the students and screamed again, the young man who had spoken earlier, surreptitiously clicked the shutter of a camera hidden beneath his housecoat.

As the students examined the old man, the slaughter was well under way in the Chantille forest. Poison had been laid

and the lairs of foxes polluted with small capsules of cyclon gas. In the towns and villages, stray dogs and cats were being rounded up and some nervous pet owners were tearfully abandoning their animals in the woods.

The old man died suddenly that day as the doctor had predicted, during a violent seizure; that afternoon the young photographer who had posed as a medical student, sold his picture.

It appeared the next morning under a banner headline :

C'EST LA RAGE.

CHAPTER TWO

In the offices and pubs of Fleet Street that evening, the talk was mostly of the rabies story. Both London evening papers had used the picture and the French headline, translating for the benefit of their readers :

C'EST LA RAGE

THE FACE OF RABIES

The old man, in his final agony, gazed upwards from bar counters and desk tops, resurrecting the recurring arguments about professional ethics; on the one side, most of the younger reporters and the desk-bound staff argued that the end result illustrated the gruesome effects of the disease and justified the means of getting the picture; while others – the photographers and the older reporters – complained, sometimes bitterly, that to snatch a snap of a dying man in an isolation ward was an unwarranted intrusion which could only damage the reputation of the profession. And there were some, the self-appointed cynics and funny men, who made cracks about people being sick over their dinners and biting people in Tube trains.

Andrew Stern took no part in the discussion. He had seen the story in the early afternoon editions, read it quickly and dispassionately, searching for any possible loopholes or hint of official neglect and decided immediately that there were none. There was no place where one could reasonably hope to attach blame : an anonymous tramp of no fixed abode; a fox, missing and by now dead. He passed on quickly to the rest of the news, barely glancing at the face of the old man.

Later in the pub when someone tried to draw him into the discussion, he grunted something non-committal and

moved away. He had no need to worry himself with such irrelevancies. He had gone beyond all that. Andrew Stern's life was a simple one: black and white, cut and dried, without complications. He was thirty-six years old, medium height, clean shaven, curly haired, stocky and wore good suits, understated and elegant, nothing flashy. He had been in journalism since he was sixteen and with his present paper for eight years, three of them abroad. And now he was at his peak. For eighteen months he had been responsible only to Ron Franklin whose title was Assistant Editor in Charge of Special Projects. These days, Stern did only the big stories, the long-term investigations, hunting out the chisellers and the frauds, his special targets being those who made off with public money or took liberties with the public's trust. Bent coppers and wayward politicians. It was a simple, easy morality and Stern went after his victims with a single-minded dedication, blinkered against side issues, losing sleep only when someone slipped away from him or when Franklin pulled in the reins over some damned ethic which would get the paper hauled up before the Press Council.

His colleagues called him Lone Wolf and the One-Dance Kid and occasionally made jokes about him. But Stern didn't mind. Their laughter was their defence against their own relative failures; they still had to clock in each day for their ten hour shifts; they still had to satisfy the whims of the news desk. He knew that they respected him for getting above all that. And their respect was all he demanded.

Stern left the others and moved to the telephone. The woman sounded excited when she spoke but became angry and abusive when he told her that their date was cancelled. Stern hung up. He had never married and his affairs rarely lasted long. The women who were attracted by his apparent ruthlessness were finally repelled by his indifference. If

there was a soft centre to Andrew Stern, none of those who had shared his bed had discovered it.

Stern left the pub and walked to the office garage to collect his car. He was thinking about the story which he had been working on for a month and which was coming to a sudden and unexpected climax. It was a complicated business involving churchmen and a restoration fund, all tied in with backhanders to Westminster. Stern knew he would have to be on his toes the next morning when the confrontation would take place. If it went to plan they would be able to say in the story that the dossier was being sent to Scotland Yard; that was the way to do it. Get the story and then tell the law. Let the others hang on to the coppers' coat-tails and do nicely-written background pieces after the event. That was simple and Stern was past all that.

He slipped in behind the wheel of his new Volvo, and set off towards his flat, only ten minutes drive away in North London. At the traffic lights in Fleet Street he stopped and waited for the green. Two young girls were standing at the kerb; one of them nudged the other and bent low, peering into his window, winking and running her tongue along her top lip. But Stern, intent on his thoughts, paid no heed to her.

CHAPTER THREE

For two weeks after the death of the old man, the doctors in the north and east of France were swamped with calls. The surgeries were full and the telephones constantly busy. The whole population, it seemed, had been bitten or licked or scratched by dogs and cats, foxes and badgers, budgies, rats, horses. For a period, the fear of the disease threatened to become uncontrollable. Hospitals ordered more serum, the authorities followed up cases which seemed to be genuine and a lot which were doubtful. Each day the doctors had to consider whether or not to vaccinate the men, women and children who came to them, whether to take the risk of the unpleasant and possibly dangerous series of injections. And just when they thought that perhaps they might be over-run, as the stocks of the vaccine began to sink to a dangerously low level, the panic eased and people began to forget. Christmas was coming and there were other things on their minds. The face of the dying old man gradually slipped out of the public consciousness.

Lambert Diggery had taken his wife and daughter on holiday to France and they had spent New Year with friends in Marseilles. Now they made their way slowly north. Joan and Lambert had enjoyed the luxury of sleeping late and long, and Emma, for the most part, had been the perfect ten-year-old : inquisitive, cheerful, ready to go off for walks on her own as if she realised instinctively that her parents needed time alone with one another. On their final day they lunched in a small routiers in the Ardennes and Emma was silently practising a short speech when she

caught sight of the cat. 'In the Ardennes,' she said 'we had a most distinctive bouillabaisse.'

She repeated the word, mouthing it in mime. Boo-ya-bezz. She would have to be spot-on with her pronunciation when she got back to school or else Sheila would immediately spot a mistake. She looked at her father who was reading a paper as he ate his soup. 'My father recommended it,' mouthed Emma. 'He told me the boo-ya-bezz was simply out of this world.' She reached for her glass and sipped a little wine wishing that Daddy hadn't insisted in watering it down quite so much. At nearly eleven years old one should surely be able to take the odd glass of wine undiluted. One was, after all in France, not stuffy old Kent. As she tossed her hair back she caught a second glimpse of the cat as it peered round the café door before ducking its head away again. She watched the doorway for a moment and the cat appeared again, this time blinking, walking forward stiff-legged, rubbing against the frame. It wasn't a pretty cat: greyish with dull eyes and the marks of a bruise midway along its belly. Emma thought someone must have kicked it. The French, the brutal French, forever kicking out at defenceless animals. The cat licked its lips and raised its head, sniffing at the smells from the tables. It moved forward, slowly looking to right and left. Emma thought it seemed hesitant, perhaps even suspicious but she checked herself. She knew better than to label animals with human characteristics. She had read often enough that dogs and cats were not little people and it was foolish to think so. The cat was staring straight into her eyes and she fought back the tempting thought that it recognised she was friendly and might be protective. All the cat could sense was the smell of the soup.

As it moved towards her, slowly, its tail held high, the whiskers twitching, Emma glanced at her father. He was still reading, his spoon held lightly in his hand. He wouldn't

notice. And her mother was staring absent-mindedly through the window. Slowly Emma reached with her spoon for a morsel of fish, scooped it from the bowl and pretended to chew it. She was enjoying herself. The cat had stopped five feet away looking all around the room before returning its gaze to Emma. She switched the piece of fish from her spoon to her hand and bent slightly forward, her fist under the table. She nodded at the cat, a serious little gesture and hissed quietly, bending low, holding the tit-bit between her thumb and forefinger, inches from the floor. The cat moved forward again, faster this time.

'EMMA', squealed Joan. 'What on earth . . .?'

The girl snatched her hand back startled as the cat leapt, missing the fish, grabbing at her finger with its teeth and turning quickly to make a rush for the door, dodging the feet and ducking under tables.

'Oh my God,' Joan was on her feet, waltzing round the table towards her daughter.

'It's nothing mother. Don't fuss. It was frightened, that's all. Just a little nip.' Emma had quietly placed her finger in a glass of water.

Lambert Diggery had looked up as his wife shrieked. He glanced at Emma, saw she was alright, closed his eyes and counted to five, hoping Joan wouldn't make too much of a scene. When he opened them again he saw a thin little man in a floral shirt and cavalry twill trousers standing by his table asking in English if he could help.

'I'm sorry?' said Diggery.

'I'm from Luton,' the little man said seriously. 'St John's Ambulance in my spare time. May I take a look?'

Diggery shrugged and the little man examined Emma's finger. He stood back and nodded in apparent satisfaction. 'Just a scratch, barely broken the surface. But I'd have it washed in disinfectant as soon as you can. You never can tell you know.'

Joan looked at him impatiently, smoothing Emma's hair back from her face and Diggery stood up, holding out his hand, thanking the man and offering him a brandy.

'Very kind,' he said, dragging a chair from a nearby table and sitting down. Again he introduced himself. He had been on holiday for ten days, he said. He was in furniture and his wife had been ill. He nodded over his shoulder to where a woman sat at a corner table smiling at them. He said he had seen a lot of accidents being in the Ambulance Service. Sometimes he covéred the football matches. Diggery was having trouble concealing the yawns when the little man finally said he'd better be getting back to his wife. Diggery thanked him again and accepted his business card, saying he would be sure to look him up if ever he was in Luton.

It took Diggery the rest of the afternoon to drive to his friend's home in Chantille where they had been invited to spend the night. Emma sat in the back, dozing, staring out of the window, occasionally asking sleepy questions about the towns and villages they passed through. When Diggery glanced in his driving mirror he could see the red splash of the antiseptic on her finger. He smiled to himself and winked affectionately at his daughter.

In the front passenger seat Joan was sprawled asleep, her mouth open, the map askew on her lap. She was supposed to be navigating. She would always insist on navigating. Dear Joan, he thought. It was just that she could never make it through the day without three or four little naps so he took the precaution of knowing exactly where he was going before they set off. If he trusted Joan to get them there they would likely end up in Spain or somewhere. He was glad to be going home. The holiday had been worthwhile. Emma had been happy and Joan would have little to complain about for another six months or so. But he was glad it was over. It wasn't that he hadn't enjoyed

himself, but there were times on the autoroutes during those interminable kilometres that he could actually see the work piling up on the desk and the young men in the office getting it wrong. But he'd enjoyed it. The food, in general, had been superb and it had been instructive to walk round the châteaus, taste the wines, get a few lungfuls of country air. Diggery smiled. Open air indeed. There was enough open air at home. What nonsense. But at least he knew when he was trying to convince himself of something. There were others whose powers of self-deception were developed so finely that they didn't know whether they were coming or going. But not me, thought Diggery, not me.

He shugged his shoulders and bent his free leg at the knee. Diggery was a tall man, just over six feet, and lean. But he was stiffening up with driving and he yawned uncontrollably, wishing he was home. He glanced at his watch, saw it was just on the hour and reached forward to switch on the radio, fiddled with the dial until he found the BBC and turned down the volume so that he would not disturb his wife.

He listened intently as the announcer reeled off the headlines: more trouble at Leyland, a collision of buses on the Yorkshire moors, new moves to curb soccer hooliganism, the latest trade figures. He snapped off the set and settled back into his seat.

'Daddy?' Emma's voice was sharp and made him jump.

'Mmm?'

'What is the balance of trade deficit?'

'Do you mean what *is* it or how much is it?'

'I know how much it is. They've just announced it. Two hundred and twelve millions. But what exactly is it?'

'The difference between what we export and what we import,' said Diggery, smiling.

'Yes, I thought as much.' Emma was silent for a moment. 'It's no way to run a country, is it?'

Diggery chuckled. 'Perhaps it will be closed when we get back,' he said.

Behind him he heard a small giggle. He half-turned and leant his arm over the back seat, waving his hand at her, wanting to pat her on the head. Emma squeezed his hand and held it until Diggery came to a turning and had to put both hands on the wheel.

They reached the Count's home by early evening and were welcomed effusively. The Count was charming to Joan and made a particular fuss of Emma. When they had eaten, he led the girl into the yard and pointed out the stables to her.

Emma ran down the drive, waving over her shoulder. There seemed to be no-one around and she wandered from stall to stall peering inside. She knew horses. She had been brought up with them and she had a pony of her own, but she had never seen such animals as these. She was staring into one of the stalls, clucking in her throat, trying to attract the attention of a large mare when she heard a scuffling sound behind her. Turning, she saw a small white dog skidding round the corner of the yard, slipping on a patch of grass. A few feet behind, a stable boy lunged at it and caught it by a hind leg. The dog squealed and struggled but the boy had it trapped, slapping it on the nose and swearing at it. Emma drew back into the doorway as the boy snapped a chain round the dog's neck, hooked a strap through one of the links and tied it to an iron ring in the wall. He stared into the dog's face and said something which caused Emma to frown. Again he shouted the word and Emma thought back to her French lessons and shuddered. She watched the stable boy leave the yard and waited for a while, listening to the whine of the dog, then tip-toed towards it. The dog saw her and stared into her

face, its head twisted against the wall. As Emma approached, it growled and she noticed that one of its ears lay flat against its face while the other pointed forward towards her.

'Okay, okay,' she whispered, holding out a hand cautiously to its face. 'You *are* a strange looking dog, aren't you? But I won't let them drown you.' She gazed round the yard and there seemed to be no-one around. Quickly she untied the chain. The dog sneezed, shook its head and jumped up at her, trying to lick her face.

'Go away,' she whispered. 'Go on. Run away for goodness sake.'

Emma pined to go back to the house but the dog followed, leaping at her elbows and spinning round like a dervish, chasing its tail.

Half an hour later the Count and Diggery found her sitting on the terrace with the dog at her feet. She looked up. 'They were going to drown him.'

The Count shouted a name and a waiter appeared at the door. The Count spoke softly to him and the waiter tried to pick up the dog but it cringed behind Emma's legs. 'I can't have dogs near the horses, Emma,' said the Count gently.

'No, I suppose not. Come here fatso.' She shoved the dog by the rump and the waiter grabbed it, picked it up and carried it towards the stables. As they disappeared into the gloom Emma could hear the dog begin to whine again.

That night as she lay in bed she wondered how long the dog would suffer when they drowned it and what would go through its mind as the stable boy held its head under water....

CHAPTER FOUR

Lambert Diggery was pleased to be home. The drive from the Count's home to Calais had been uneventful, the crossing was as calm as could be expected and the A2 from Dover had been virtually deserted. Nonetheless he was exhausted when he finally turned the Jag. into the drive. He had planned to spend a couple of hours catching-up on work in the evening but his eyelids wouldn't allow it and he fell asleep at his desk. Joan put him to bed and he slept for nine dreamless hours.

In the morning he was impatient to be off. He kissed Joan goodbye and shouted cheerily to Emma from the hallway but there was no reply from her room, so he shrugged and left for London, glad to be back in the well-worn routine.

Emma had stirred at her father's call but she didn't wake up until almost midday. As she turned over, yawning, the dog yelped and began to struggle under the sheets. Emma sat up, momentarily startled, then smiled and put her finger to her lips, burrowing down again and cuddling the dog as it thrashed its way up the mattress until its head emerged on the pillow.

Emma swung out of bed and smoothed down her nightdress, rubbing at the material, gathering the dog's hairs into small clumps. She looked round the room, opened a drawer in her dresser and dropped the hair inside. She turned back to the bed and smiled. The dog had clambered out from under the sheets and stood on the bed panting. It tried to walk but a front leg buckled and it pitched over onto its nose.

Emma laughed. 'Stay there junkie and I'll bring you some breakfast. And keep quiet.'

Closing the door she went downstairs. Her mother was on her way out. 'Morning darling,' she called. 'Breakfast's on the kitchen table. I'll be an hour or so.'

'Is Mrs. Phillips coming today?'

Joan looked confused. 'No. At least I don't think so. No. I'm sure she isn't. By-eee.'

'I'll do the washing up then.'

'Lovely. By-eee.'

Joan left the house and came back a minute later for her car keys, shut the door behind her, opened it again, muttered something under her breath and was finally gone. Emma waited until she heard the Volkswagen gurgle off down the drive before going across to the kitchen cupboard. She looked along the shelves and selected a tin of pâté. She snapped it under the electric opener, emptied the contents onto a plate and ran upstairs.

The dog was mobile now, walking stiffly round the room, rubbing itself against the furniture. When Emma appeared, it barked and wagged its tail. She placed the plate on the floor and watched as the dog ate noisily, snapping at the food and shaking its head as it tried to swallow. The dog looked at her and belched.

Emma playfully slapped its nose, trying to appear reproachful.

She went to the fitted wardrobe and palmed back a couple of dresses until she found what she was looking for. She unhooked a long print dress from the rail, a Laura Ashley creation which she despised. She had told her mother that she looked like one of the Railway Children in it but Joan had bought it for her despite her protests. The first time she had been forced to wear it, she quietly demonstrated her disapproval. She didn't sulk. She wasn't that kind of girl. But she sniffed a couple of times in front

of her aunt and she coughed without putting her hand to her mouth.

Her father had noticed and had been hard put not to smile; when he scolded her, she knew he didn't really mean it.

She laid the dress on the bed and pulled the belt through the hoops. She twisted it into a rough loop through the buckle and the material ran freely. The dog wouldn't be choked if it pulled too hard. As she moved towards it, the dog backed away showing its teeth but she made gentle clucking noises and eventually it allowed her to slip the belt over its head. That done, it sat down and grinned at her, its tongue hanging from its mouth, the tail thrashing against the carpet. Emma sighed and looked at the new coating of hairs. She gazed into the dog's face and talked to it, telling it not to get so excited. The dog barked, staring at her, trying, it seemed, to understand what she was saying, cocking its one good ear, then standing again and spinning round, snapping at its tail.

Emma shook her head. 'You're mad. Quite, quite bats. Come on then. To the woods.'

Diggery's house backed onto a sprawling wood of beech trees which stretched five miles towards the Downs and was cut by the big Motorway leading into London. At its western extremity it came to an abrupt end, a tall fence cutting it off from the playing fields which swept down to the river. It was here that the townspeople came to picnic. Few of them knew about the one access lane which led into the avenue where the Diggerys lived and not many of them made use of the wood. They preferred the sunlight unfiltered.

Centuries of falling leaves had made a mulch of the ground and even in summer those who walked in the wood needed boots or stout shoes. The dogs were the main

visitors, brought daily to run where they pleased and to squat at will wherever they felt the need. In summer the wood took on a chocolate box-top complexion, but smelt more like a zoo.

In the past, before the village had been transformed into an expensive dormitory suburb, the wood had provided the backdrop for stories of highwaymen and werewolves, witches and warlocks, and bats and beasts of every imaginable species. Generations of maidens were said to have been forcibly deflowered in the dales; and terrible murders had been committed. But in living memory there had been nothing to disturb the peace; only the occasional gasp of a girl at night and the shouts of the men on a Sunday at lunch as they called their dogs to heel on the way to the pub.

Emma led the dog through the wood, walking parallel to the road, until she reached a small stable yard. The dog sniffed the air and tried to run but Emma pulled it through the gate, its feet digging small trenches in the leaves. A pony was grazing in the middle of the yard and looked up as Emma shouted its name. She ran to it, dragging the dog behind her. The pony looked startled but Emma calmed it, crooning into its ear, whispering that she had missed it while she had been away. The dog sat at her side growling deep in its throat but Emma paid no attention to it. She didn't notice it get up and move away from her and she didn't see the attack; but she felt the muscles on the pony's neck tense and she screamed when it jerked its head upwards into her face as it lashed a hoof hard out backwards, sending the dog tumbling and squealing into the dirt, tearing the belt from its neck.

She paused briefly to check that the pony had calmed itself before turning to run after the dog which was sprinting away into the woods. The pony watched them go, holding one hoof off the ground and glancing over its

shoulder at the drops of blood which oozed from the spot where the dog had bitten.

Emma shouted for the dog to stop but it ran on, leaping in the air and turning in tight circles, shaking its head. As she got close to it, the dog dropped into a crouch, then turned and dashed away leaving skid marks in the leaves. They ran deeper into the woods until the houses were out of sight. A rabbit broke cover and the dog was off, tail down, moving low and fast until the little animal dived into a burrow.

As Emma reached the spot, the dog turned and snapped at her, then turned again to stare into the ground where the rabbit had vanished. Emma quickly slipped the belt round its neck and pulled the dog away. They walked silently for a while until they reached a small hollow where the roots of a large beech tree had become exposed, leaving a hiding-place, partly hidden by bracken. Emma pulled the dog down the slope, tied the belt to one of the roots, crawled underneath and began to dig. Her package was still there, a polythene bag buried a couple of inches under the soil. Emma scraped away the earth, opened it and pulled out a book and a bag of mints.

'Here pooch,' she said, throwing a sweet in the air. The dog caught it and settled down, occasionally choking, coughing and spitting like an old man. It allowed Emma to probe its body with her fingers until she was satisfied that the pony had done no damage. She lay back into her den and began to read. At first the dog appeared to be sleeping but, after a few minutes, it sat up, snapped at the air and strained at the belt, shaking its head, trying to free itself.

Emma told it to be quiet and lie down but soon the dog became restless and began to whine. Emma, frowning as she read, reached out a hand absent-mindedly to stroke the animal, and as her fingers flapped in its face, the dog sprang....

CHAPTER FIVE

The tip had reached Andrew Stern by a tortuous route. It began with a single uncharacteristic slip of the tongue by a prostitute in Brussels. It was barely anything, just a casual remark in front of her sister that Lambert Diggery was proving to be very useful. The sister thought little of it, except for the fact that this was the first time she had ever heard the name of one of Monique's clients. Later that week she had mentioned his name to her boyfriend who passed it on to a friend until eventually the connection between Lambert Diggery and Monique was firmly established in the circles of gossip in Brussels, a city which had become second only to Washington as a centre for political tittle-tattle and scandals, real or imagined.

Ten days after Monique had mentioned Diggery's name, a Belgian journalist who worked as a stringer for Stern's paper had phoned the foreign desk and the message had been relayed to Ron Franklin.

It was almost as an afterthought that Franklin had flipped a piece of paper across his desk to Stern.

'You heard of this chap?' he asked.

Stern shook his head.

'A Civil Service mandarin. Classically faceless. Seems he's knocking off some high-class hooker in Brussels and the word is that he may have been caught up in something disreputable.'

Stern grimaced and Franklin smiled at him. 'I know old boy. It's hardly surprising. Rumours and whores walk hand in hand. But just check it out will you. If this should turn out to be another Lockheed, we would like to be in there first.'

'But it's not top priority?' asked Stern.

Franklin shook his head. 'Don't lose a full night's sleep over it.'

Stern left Franklin's office and ordered Diggery's cuttings from the library. While he was waiting he looked him up in a battered copy of *Who's Who*.

'Diggery Lambert Ronald. Born January 12, 1930. Senior Civil Servant with the Department of the Environment; appointed departmental representative to the European Economic Community, Brussels HQ, 1975. Son of Kenneth and Arabella Diggery of Sutton Coldfield; educated Chichester and Oxford; 1st Class Hons. Economics. Married Joan Smythe 1962. One daughter, Emma . . .'

Stern ran his finger along the list of appointments which marked Diggery's career, admiring the way the man had charted a successful course through three governmental departments on his way to his present position.

'Recreations : none,' he said aloud. 'Club, Civil Service.'

The cuttings arrived but there was nothing to add to the bare lines in the reference book. Just the occasional paragraph from the *Times* and the *Financial Times* noting a change of job. But nothing else. 'Interviews none,' thought Stern, 'Gossip, none. An exemplary life. Until now.'

He strolled across the floor, squeezing between desks, nodding occasionally to the men working behind them. He bent over a small wheel index and flipped through until he came to a card marking Diggery's home town. There were two names on it.

'Bob,' he shouted. A head was raised from behind a sheaf of papers. Stern held up the card.

'Which one do you reckon? Billy Brennan or the agency?'

'Young Brennan's okay,' said the news editor. 'Keen. A good digger.'

'Can he keep his mouth shut?'

'Who knows? Can anybody?'

Stern wrote Brennan's number on a piece of paper and went back to his office. He made a few phone calls and within an hour he was driving south out of town.

Twice a day the peace and quiet and genteel monotony of the small town where Billy Brennan worked was routinely demonstrated by the check calls made to the police and fire stations and the hospital. Rarely did Billy bother to make notes. Cats went up trees, small boys started small fires, old men fell down and were admitted to Casualty and there were occasional minor skirmishes in grocery shops and pubs over loose change.

And so when Andrew Stern phoned and asked to meet him he had to fight to keep the excitement from his voice. Billy was twenty-three and still lived with his Mum. He was small and fat, the product of years of his mother's cooking and he knew that if he didn't get out soon, he would be there till she died. He was bored with the local paper but it was difficult to move on. Occasionally he would get the odd job to help out someone in Fleet Street, but he had never met anyone like Andrew Stern: three times mentioned in the I.P.C. Reporter of the Year awards and the rumour was that he was in line for Journo of the Year this time. Billy knew all about the awards. He could recite the names of the winners for the past decade.

Stern was already in the pub when Billy walked in and he recognised him immediately from his by-line picture. Stern stood up, stretched out a hand and asked him what he would have to drink. Billy noticed that Stern was on whisky.

'A lager please.'

Stern nodded and they sat down.

Billy cleared his throat. 'I saw your thing on the Bishop.'

'Oh yes?'

'Will he go down, do you think?'

Stern smiled. 'I expect so. You don't nick a hundred thousand pounds meant for restoration work and then expect to get off with probation.'

Billy laughed. He was about to say how much he enjoyed the piece when Stern spoke. 'Did you find anything on our man?'

Billy fished inside his jacket, pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Stern.

'That was quick,' said Stern, glancing at the half-dozen lines neatly typed. There was little that wasn't in *Who's Who*.

'He doesn't get about much does he?'

Billy blushed. 'I'm sorry. There's nothing much so far. He seems to keep himself to himself.'

'Not even Rotary Club?'

'No. I checked that.'

Stern stood up and offered to buy Billy some lunch. Billy accepted, noticing that he had been wringing his hands like Uriah Heep. He resolved to stop acting star-struck and he hoped that Stern was big enough not to make him seem foolish. After lunch Billy returned to the office and Stern went upstairs.

He had booked a room for the night, planning to stay down and go back up to town in the morning. His reasons were less than professional. When he had read Franklin's memo, something had clicked in his mind and he realised later that this was the town where the girl called Dorothy came from; the tall one he had met at a publisher's party, the red-head with the long legs and the nicely arrogant manner. He'd noted her down for future reference and phoned her at lunch-time. She said she'd be delighted to have dinner but she would have to put someone off first. He'd liked that.

Dorothy would be the compensation for this Diggery

business. Of course he would do his best and explore all the avenues but he knew that this would be a non-starter. Franklin knew also but he was covering himself just in case. . . . But on the other hand, if there was something to be found, then Andrew Stern was the man to dig it out.

He was lying on the top of the bed, half asleep and thinking of Dorothy, when the phone rang.

'Andrew? It's Billy.' The young reporter was stammering with suppressed excitement. 'It's a strange thing but Emma Diggery has been reported missing.'

Stern frowned. 'How long?'

'Since this morning.'

Stern said nothing.

'Yes, well I know it's nothing much but her mother called the police and I've got to go along to talk to her and I thought maybe you'd like to come.'

Stern's first reaction was to refuse. The rule, in normal circumstances, was to stay clear of the victim until you had all the ammunition. But, on the other hand, this would give him a chance to see inside the house and get the feel of the place.

Billy promised to pick him up in ten minutes.

As they turned in through the gate and along the gravel drive past a small wooden signpost indicating 'The Gables', Stern whistled through his teeth. Seventy, eighty thousand pounds worth, he thought. Mock Elizabethan, half-timbered, ivy-covered, two large bay windows, a heavy oak door, attics above the first floor; eight, maybe ten rooms.

As Billy rang the bell Stern wondered if there would be a maid. He looked at Billy, hopping nervously from foot to foot and he was reminded of the little American policeman on television, the one with the cigar and the dirty raincoat.

'Yes?' Joan Diggery was peering out of an upstairs window, a tissue held to her nose. Billy stepped backwards and looked up.

'Oh, hello, my name is Brennan. From the *Advertiser*.' He was stammering a little.

'Yes?'

'Well, I hate to bother you but we heard about your daughter and I was passing and . . .'

Joan turned away from the window. A moment later she opened the door, turned her back on them and walked back into the hall. 'You'd better come in I suppose.'

Billy tried to introduce Stern but Joan wasn't listening.

'Look there's no story for you or anything like that.' She sounded irritable, standing in the kitchen, her back towards them. 'It's been hours now and she never goes out without telling me. And she never misses meals. Do you want a coffee or something?' She paced the kitchen staring at the walls. Stern studied her. Tall, angular with a gaunt face, high cheek-boned and probably beautiful a few years ago but too distracted now; the mouth was thin lipped and turned downwards in a permanent sneer.

With a wife like this, he thought, you could easily get into trouble in Brussels.

She was chattering again : 'I don't know. It's so depressing. And that pâté tin over there. She never eats pâté. Hates the stuff.'

She turned to face them. 'We've just come back, you know. France.'

Billy cleared his throat. 'Did you have a row with her or anything?'

She ignored him.

He tried again. 'Where do you think she might have gone?'

'How should I know? Look, I think you should go.' She waved her hand absent-mindedly. 'The police said they were coming and I can't have the place cluttered up. . . .'

Billy stood his ground and asked if he could have a photograph of Emma, to help . . . Joan turned, left the

kitchen and came back a moment later with a print, telling him not to muck it up and shooing them out, as if they were two large roosters under her feet.

'I didn't do very well, did I?' said Billy as they drove out of the gate.

'You got inside,' said Stern, and Billy smiled as though he'd just been made Reporter of the Year.

Stern had walked in the woods for half an hour when he caught sight of the girl in the photograph. He smiled to himself: this was getting silly. First you come down to town on the very day that young Emma vanishes, then you decide to leave the young reporter and take your first walk in years and you bump straight into the errant child.

She watched him come towards her: a tall, thin child with a serious expression.

'You're Emma Diggery,' said Stern solemnly. She nodded.

'Your mother's been worried about you.'

'Mmm,' said Emma, unimpressed.

'She called the police.'

'Oh, for goodness sake.' The girl shook her head and sighed. 'Typical, just typical.'

They walked together in silence for a while before Stern asked: 'It's none of my business, but what kept you out so long?'

'I lost my dog. He kept running away.'

'Ah,' he looked down at her as she sucked at her fingers. 'You're not crying are you?'

'Don't be silly.' And he was reminded of her mother; the same sharp irritability, the confident, dismissive gesture of the well-to-do, not given to suffering foolish questions gladly.

'What was its name anyway? The dog?'

Emma looked upwards, pursing her lips, 'Etienne,' she said quickly.

'My name's Andrew by the way.'

'Ah,' she said, copying him.

'I believe your father's fairly famous.'

'Mmm,' she said. 'We had the Prime Minister to tea once.'

'I expect that put your mother in a spin.'

'She was in bed for a week.'

As Emma caught sight of the house she began to run and Stern had to race to keep up with her; over her shoulder she shouted that her father was home.

At first the Diggerys did not notice him. Joan burst into tears and held her close, while Emma blinked and turned her head away.

Stern studied Diggery: a tall man, a sharp, intelligent face, bright eyed, an aquiline nose. He stood with his hands behind his back, slightly stooped, frowning. Stern had learnt by experience that his first impressions of a victim were usually fairly accurate and this man would pose problems.

'Emma, where have you *been*?' Joan was staring into the girl's face. 'I've been going crazy . . .'

'She's back now,' said Diggery abruptly. 'That's the important thing.'

Emma wriggled free and pointed to Stern. 'This gentleman found me,' she said coyly, shifting the attention away from her.

Diggery looked up startled, then smiled quickly and stretched out his hand. Stern introduced himself.

'She was on her way home anyway,' said Stern as they shook hands.

'Nonetheless, it's very kind.' Diggery led him into the house and Joan looked up at him but there was no trace of recognition. Diggery invited Stern to stay and have a drink and seemed genuinely disappointed when Stern said

he had to leave. 'But if I may use your . . .?' Stern asked, pointing upstairs.

'Of course,' Diggery showed him the way.

When Diggery returned to the kitchen, Joan was perched on a stool and Emma was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed, hands folded in her lap.

'Well, young lady?'

Emma shrugged her shoulders and smiled up at him.

'An explanation seems to be in order.'

His tone was severe. He was annoyed at being called back from the office, especially on his first day, for nothing at all, and with the police involved. It was all Joan's fault but he was consciously transferring his irritation to his daughter, forcing himself not to smile as she stared at him pouting and blinking, trying to soften him. She scratched her head like Stan Laurel and he wanted to take her in his arms and hug her, but he checked himself. 'Come come, Emma. This is serious.'

The girl was silent for a moment, frowning, as if she were weighing something up in her mind.

'I couldn't very well leave him behind,' she said quietly. 'They were going to drown him.'

Diggery continued to stare at her and she tried a smile. 'So I brought him back and now he's run off. I was looking for him. That's why I was out so long.' She paused, testing his reaction. 'I would have told you tonight anyway. I mean, I didn't expect to keep him hidden for very long.'

Diggery spoke softly. 'This is the dog from Alain's house presumably?'

Emma nodded. 'I couldn't let them drown him.'

From behind her shoulder came a low wail. 'Oh my God,' said Joan. 'Dear, dear God.'

Diggery said nothing. He shook his head in bewilder-

ment like a boxer who hasn't seen the big punch coming. There was a knock on the kitchen door.

Diggery stiffened and looked over his shoulder. Joan had begun to get up but he held out his hand, then looked down at his daughter.

'Don't move,' he said sharply.

She stared at him, searching for some sign of sympathy but there was none and she turned her head away, fighting back the tears. Diggery turned, straightened his tie and opened the door. Stern was smiling. 'May I go out the front way?'

'Why of course,' Diggery ushered him along the hall, thanking him again for seeing his daughter home. At the door they shook hands.

'Goodbye,' said Stern. 'Tell Emma that I hope she finds her dog.'

Diggery frowned. 'I'm sorry.'

'Someone will pick it up I'm sure.'

Diggery leant back against the frame of the door and sighed. 'She told you that she had a dog?' he asked, a hint of weariness in his voice. Stern nodded.

'But you didn't see this dog?'

'No.'

'Well, you wouldn't. We have no dog. I'm afraid Emma tends to fantasise at times. Other children invent phantom friends. Emma comes up with imaginary pets.'

Stern smiled, said goodbye, turned and walked down the drive past the large black Jaguar, glancing at the splash of green of the Nothing to Declare sign, still pasted to the window. Diggery watched him go then stepped back and closed the door.

Joan was in bed when her husband looked in ten minutes later. She opened her eyes as he sat down beside her.

'Well?' she said.

'It was only a little dog, she said, just a little terrier . . .' He spoke slowly. 'She drugged the damned thing with one of your Valium pills.' He turned and looked at her. 'How about that?'

Joan closed her eyes again.

'. . . and she smuggled it over in her picnic hamper.'

Joan groaned. 'Would you like a drink?'

'No.'

She sat up suddenly. 'Well, at least, undo your bloody tie.'

Diggery spoke sharply: 'Joan, get a hold of yourself.'

She lay back again covering her face with a pillow. For a moment there was silence before Diggery continued. 'She won't say a word to anyone. I've explained the seriousness of it.' He shook his head and laughed. 'She's amazing you know. She said that she could easily have kept it to herself and made up a story about being out all day. That's what she said: "At least I was honest. I could have kept the secret to myself." '

'My God,' said Joan bitterly. 'I wish the little wretch had done just that . . .'

That evening Stern took Dorothy to a country inn where they were served the best gammon steak in England. The landlord asked Stern if he had tasted any better and Stern admitted that the steak was without doubt the best in England; and the landlord, in turn, bought them each a large brandy, saying that Dorothy was by far the most attractive woman he had ever had the pleasure to play host to.

She was a publicist she said, and successful. She had heard of him before they had met and asked sensible questions about his job. When the meal was over they went back to his hotel. There was no need for any coy seduction attempt. She had arrived prepared for an over-

night stay: Stern found himself amused and excited by her directness. And in the morning they smiled at each other over breakfast.

Two days later the virus finally brought the little dog to its knees. It lay in the mouth of an abandoned fox lair gazing blearily out into the wood, no longer in control of its body. The lower jaw hung limply and the saliva dribbled freely onto the broken earth between its paws. Occasionally it whimpered helplessly, trying to shake the imaginary obstruction from its throat.

For four hours a vixen had lain ten yards away watching the dog. She stared at it, fascinated, rarely blinking. That morning as she lay with her cubs, she had smelt the dog and had dragged herself from her lair to lead it away, dashing forward in short bursts so that it would leave the cubs alone and follow – but with this dog there had been no need to run. The vixen had been confused. Each time she sprinted, she listened for the yelping and the scampering that would indicate that she had been spotted: but each time, when she had stopped and turned, the dog had been left further behind, crawling slowly on its belly and dragging its feet.

And now it lay, half covered in earth and the vixen waited for it to die.

The vixen watched for another two hours until the wood was dark and there had been no sound from the dog. Slowly it stood up and padded soundlessly across the clearing and, as it approached, the dog opened its eyes and prepared itself for a final struggle.

CHAPTER SIX

During the next four weeks Monique entertained Lambert Diggery three times. He arrived regularly just before midnight and left her apartment an hour later. The money had been paid in advance through their contact at the Department: three hundred U.S. dollars.

They had developed a routine in the year since they had first met. She would be prepared for him, dressed as if to go out for the evening, in a smart cocktail dress. Silently they would embrace before she led him to the bedroom, undressed him and soaped him in the shower, until her clothes were sodden and she would be forced, with a smile to take them off and change. She would lead him back to the bed and leave him lying on his stomach while she pulled on the boots and the frilly cotton dress. Then she would massage him, using oil and powder, until he could no longer hold himself in check.

Of all her clients he was the most intense in his need for her. She assumed that his was a life devoted to discipline and self-control and that she was his only release. Occasionally she had trouble with him and was left slightly bruised and swollen; and on one occasion he had gone too far, placing his thumbs on her throat and squeezing so that she had been forced to bring her knee up hard to stop him.

When it was over and he lay half asleep, she would go over to his coat and take out the envelope. There was no longer any mention of it; not since the first night six months previously when a man had come to the room and told Diggery that his services were required as a messenger.

Diggery had listened quietly, sitting on the bed, wrapped in a damp towel as the man showed him the phial of

heroin which had been planted on him at Heathrow and which he had carried through Customs. The man had no need to spell out anything to Diggery: that they could now blackmail him, he had no doubt. To plead innocence at home would be of little use. He could have got away with an association with a prostitute; but heroin was another matter.

And so he brought the envelope through every time now. He didn't know what he was carrying. All they would say was that it was nothing which would damage the security of his country. He was doing nothing treasonable and it would be of no advantage to him to know what he brought to them. All he needed to know was that he was what they called a safe pigeon, virtually CD plated. There was no risk, they said, and he chose to believe them. But each time he was given the envelope in the lavatories at Heathrow, he had to lock himself in a cubicle and vomit.

At home, his routine continued uninterrupted; most nights he was home in the middle of the evening in time for supper with his wife and daughter. Occasionally he would have a game of chess or backgammon with Emma and at the weekends they would bring out the Scrabble board. Sometimes he took Joan to the theatre in town and on occasions they entertained his friends and colleagues at home, the chairman of the Commission coming out one evening to sample the Diggery's hospitality. Joan's chocolate mousse had become legendary in diplomatic circles. As a hostess she was unsurpassable and would keep her guests amused for hours with her opinions on the Arts. Over the years the Diggerys had developed a double act of their own, with Joan spouting her theories and Lambert interjecting clever little put-down lines for their mutual amusement. They enjoyed these evenings but often it took Joan a full day in bed to recover from the strain.

On the first of these dinner parties after Emma's dis-

appearance, the topic of conversation had come round to the continuing backwash in American political life of the Watergate affair and Diggery had ventured an uncharacteristic defence of Richard Nixon.

He had suggested that, given the choice between professional survival and one's duty, most men in public life, including those presently seated around his table, would instinctively choose the former, leaving the conscience to be quelled at a later date; especially, he added, if the choice had to be made quickly. There were grunts of agreement and Diggery paused before continuing. If one managed to put the record straight early enough, he said, then one might even make political capital out of it; one could say that whatever had happened had simply highlighted the need for vigilance. He gazed around the table. But the conditions for an instant confession would have to be right, he said. One would have to respect the man to whom one was trusting one's conscience. He would have to be at least of equal status; not for example, some scruffy little newspaper reporter.

Again they nodded in agreement although some didn't know what he was getting at; and others kept silent because they did not wish to offend their host. For a moment Joan looked quizzically at her husband and then changed the subject.

Emma, for her part, went daily to school and worked hard. She didn't visit her den and when they drove past the lane which led to the wood, she made a point of looking the other way. For a week she wondered what had become of the little dog, and she told herself that it would be alright. After all, it had been saved from drowning. Perhaps a nice family had him now, or the R.S.P.C.A. They would know what to do with him. Quite casually and deliberately she put the animal out of her mind.

It had been a busy month for Andrew Stern. As well as the Diggery investigation, he was working on two stories, both far more likely to achieve results. There was the infiltration by a group of International Socialists into a prominent trade union with the alleged channelling of funds into party coffers; and a straightforward graft case involving a councillor and a building firm.

So far the Diggery story had come to nothing. The Belgian stringer had confirmed the connection with the prostitute but the local police had nothing on the girl. Discreet enquiries in Whitehall and at the Yard had shown that no-one suspected Diggery of anything, but Stern was annoyed that the diplomatic correspondent had been brought in to ask questions. The man, so far as Stern was concerned, owed more loyalty to his contacts than to the newspaper and he was too free with his opinions.

Stern was inclined to let the Diggery situation rest and Ron Franklin was showing little interest in it. The bonus of the whole affair had been Dorothy. Stern had taken her out five times since the first night. She made him laugh, calling him Scoop and Ace and referring to his orgasms as his deadlines. She made no demands on him and asked him for no commitment. Their relationship was based solely on good-humoured sex and it suited them both admirably. When she rang his office and invited him down for the weekend, he had no hesitation in accepting.

'But,' he asked, 'what can I get down there that I can't find for myself in London?'

'The best gammon steak in England,' she said.

'Well, of course. But perhaps I'm on a fish diet.'

'Okay, then there's the hunt.'

'Pardon?'

'The fox,' she said. 'Eff, Oh, Ecks. Foxhunt. A guest pack of hounds and horsemen are coming down from Cheshire.'

'Well that's just marvellous,' he said.

'And a gymkhana on the Sunday. How about that?'

'I'm allergic to horseflesh.'

There was a short silence and Stern could hear her sigh heavily. 'Oh well, damn it. There's always my body.'

'Done,' he said.

He drove down that night and they were still in bed and sound asleep when the horsemen from Cheshire met with their hounds in the driveway of the Green Man pub just outside town.

The vixen lay panting in a ditch as she waited for the hounds to appear over the hill. She could run no further. Her whole body shuddered, the back legs kicking out spasmodically beneath her. She tried to stand but the effort was too much and she pitched forward onto her snout, uttering a small yelp as her face scraped against the earth. She had run the hounds for two miles now and still they came, two bitches leading the pack with the huntsmen straggling a hundred yards behind. As the leaders came over the crest of the hill they let out a howl of recognition and slewed towards the ditch where the vixen struggled to rise, coughing and rasping as she dragged herself to her feet. The hair stood straight on the nape of her neck and her tongue flicked round the corners of her mouth as the hounds skidded to a halt in front of her. For a moment the three animals stood motionless before the vixen drew from somewhere the last of her strength and leapt at the bigger of the hounds, snapping her teeth into the side of its neck, the other bitch leaping backwards scrabbling in the earth, until the vixen spun away snarling an attack and lunging for its throat.

Had the huntsmen arrived just then, they would have seen the unique spectacle of two of their hounds being held at bay by a frenzied fox, but by the time they reached the ditch, the fight was over. The rest of the pack had torn the

life from the animal and the only strange feature of the chase was the attitude of two of the dogs, sullenly limping home, the larger one scratching at its neck where the blood had congealed.

The gymkhana was being held in the meadow at the foot of the Downs and as Stern and Dorothy arrived, the show jumping event was getting under way. They trudged arm in arm across the grass to the arena where Billy Brennan was leaning against a fence, a notebook and a programme jutting from his jacket pocket. He was sipping beer from a can and looking bored.

Stern tapped him on the shoulder. Billy turned round and beamed at him, then shook hands with Dorothy. 'I didn't know you were interested in horses, Andrew,' he said and Dorothy shook her head and neighed, pawing the ground with her boot. Billy blushed and Stern ruffled his hair.

They stood chatting for a while, looking at the show and watching the spectators. Groups of men and women were standing in the car park picnicking from spreads of food and wine laid in the boots of their cars.

'Where shall we go later?' squealed a woman standing by a Land Rover.

'There's beer in that Jag.,' answered a strident male.

'Jolly dee.'

Stern and Dorothy chuckled and Billy grinned at them. 'Don't knock it,' he said. 'Those are my readers out there.'

Stern was about to suggest that they go to the tent for a drink when the tannoy rasped out an announcement: 'Number sixteen on her pony Bradford: Emma Diggery aged ten. Good luck Emma.'

Billy pointed to the paddock where. Lambert Diggery was helping his daughter into the saddle.

He turned, leant on the fence and watched intently as Emma walked the pony in a circle. He knew nothing about

horses but it seemed obvious to him that she knew what she was doing, sitting high in the saddle, composed, then bending to whisper in the pony's ear.

When Dorothy muttered that the pony was going to be trouble he didn't understand what she meant until the animal began to buck, tossing its mane, appearing to snap at the air, trying to clash its teeth together. Stern saw Diggery move forward but Emma held up a hand and he stopped. Again she bent to talk to it until it settled. She steadied it and sat upright, keeping the pony motionless for a moment before touching her heels to its flanks towards the first fence, a one-bar obstacle. The pony cleared it easily but instead of cantering towards the second, it stumbled, shook its head and bolted, making straight for a three-barred gate. There were shouts from the onlookers but Stern was the first to duck under the rail, running hard as the pony hit the gate and Emma screamed as she was thrown heavily. Stern heard the sharp crack as the pony went down, scattering the decorative shrubs.

Emma was lying half underneath the pony, trying to struggle free as the beast thrashed in agony. Stern saw that its left foreleg had snapped just below the knee. He jumped through the debris, caught Emma under the arms and began to pull her backwards but she fought him, turning to cradle the pony's head, and he had to struggle as the beast screamed, its eyes gaping, teeth snapping at nothing.

Stern was sharp with the girl, cursing as he grappled with her. This was no time for good manners. He had pulled her clear and was breathing hard when he was pushed violently from the side and half fell as Diggery snatched his daughter into his arms. Stern looked up into the face of the older man. As he tried to stand, Diggery swore at him and lashed out with his foot so that Stern stumbled again and fell on to his back. And then they were surrounded, a blanket was thrown over the pony and the

vet was kneeling by its head, reaching into the big carpet-bag where the pistol was kept.

Billy helped Stern to his feet and they watched as Diggery carried his daughter away to the big Jaguar.

'What was all that about?' Billy asked.

Stern shrugged. 'Shock, I imagine.' But as he said it, he knew there was something else; it was more than simple shock which had etched the hatred into Lambert Diggery's face.

In the same manner as the tip about Monique had reached Stern's office, so had news of the investigation come to Diggery's attention. Stern had been justified in his distrust of the diplomatic correspondent. The man was an unashamed snob who considered the men of Whitehall to be more sophisticated and attractive than those he worked for on the newspaper which paid his salary. When one of his contacts asked, over a bottle of wine, why he was interested in Diggery, he replied that he had been forced into the role of unpaid snitch for one Andrew Stern. And it was not long before Diggery was advised that something was going on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the following month Diggery had to work hard to maintain his normal appearance of composure. There had been a nasty scene at Heathrow when the little man had tried to hand over the envelope and would not take Diggery's word that it had become too dangerous. Eventually Diggery had to push the man away as the small Indian attendant came across to see what the trouble was. And that night at Monique's he had shivered in her bed as he pleaded to be released from his task. Phone calls were made and he was told that there would be no more contact for a month. No more brown envelopes and no more visits to the apartment in the centre of town. But still he was nervous.

At home Emma had recovered from her bruises; but the death of Bradford made her wake in the night to weep silently. She had not heard the shot or seen the pony being dragged away into the van, but she could imagine it and that was worse. Her father talked of buying her another pony but she shook her head. Instead she worked hard in the evenings at her homework and spent an hour each night practising the piano. She had been chosen to play before the whole school at the last Assembly before the Easter break and she was well aware of the special honour she had been given.

But she was not nervous. Her father had asked if she had any butterflies in her stomach and she told him not to be so silly. He told her she was a right little ham and at first she didn't know if he was insulting her.

On the day of the concert Diggery made a point of wishing her well. Normally he left for the office before she awoke but that morning he waited an extra half hour,

knocked on her door and asked for her permission to enter. Emma was sitting by her dressing table, already in her uniform, twiddling her fingers.

'Ready for the off then?' asked Diggery.

'Daddy, this is not the St Leger.'

He smiled and patted her on the head: 'Just remember to keep your eye on the baton.'

There was time for a quick walk in the woods before she was due to leave. Diggery drove off waving; Emma and her mother climbed the little stile and began to wander through the trees. Emma thought she noticed the first buds of spring on the trees and told her mother.

'What?' said Joan. 'What buds?'

'On the trees, mother,' she said smiling at the woman's absentmindedness. Joan drove her to school and sat at the front with the other parents. Mid-way through her piece Emma made a mistake but Joan didn't spot it. The brass section was blowing full blast at the time. Again towards the end, she fumbled and hit a wrong note. Only the music teacher noticed and frowned. Two mistakes in a complicated piece like this was nothing, especially for someone so young, except . . . she thought, Emma Diggery rarely makes mistakes.

The birthday party was three days later on a Saturday afternoon and the children began arriving around three o'clock. Some were brought by their parents who were invited in for a drink. They all declined. Others arrived with nannies or au pairs. And the Cooper twins from next door walked in through the back door. They had come through the woods, the little Cooper girl already boasting a skinned knee and grinning apologetically.

Emma sat in her room listening to the chimes of the doorbell. It had been her idea to wait until everyone was assembled and then make a grand entrance. She sat at her

dresser toying with the hem of her new dress. She was pleased with it; it was modern and not the least bit twee. She felt quite grown up. The only trouble was the collar which was loose round her throat but seemed to tickle her whenever she moved her head. It shouldn't do that, after all, the material was soft enough and *expensive* enough, but nonetheless it irritated her. She stood up, shook her head and spat into her wash-hand basin. Very unladylike, she thought. From below she could hear her mother's voice and the sound of her feet on the stairs. Everyone must have arrived. She shook her head again, coughed, smoothed down her dress and left the room.

They clapped when she walked into the sitting room. The girls ooohed and drew breath in admiration as they gazed at the new dress. The Cooper boy began to sing Happy Birthday only to be nudged sharply in the chest by his sister. Emma curtseyed in the doorway and took her father's arm as he led her across the room pretending to make formal introductions.

One little boy bowed from the waist saying he was honoured to be a guest under her roof and Diggery smiled, gently pinching Emma's arm. 'Go on,' he said, 'acknowledge the young gentleman.' But Emma merely frowned.

The introductions over, Joan began ladling out glasses of punch; junior knock-out punch as she called it, and Emma led her guests in twos and threes across to a corner to admire her present. She had shrieked with delight that morning when she saw it : an antique harmonium, powered by a foot pump and bellows, with stop keys which represented clarinets, bassoons, brass. 'A veritable orchestra,' her father had said and now Emma repeated the phrase, pushing the pedal to demonstrate to the children. 'A veritable orchestra, a veritable orchestra, a veritable orchestra . . .'

'Darling do stop prattling and have some punch,' Joan

was holding out a glass. Emma reached for it, changed her mind and shook her head. 'No,' she said sharply.

Diggery looked at her : 'Alright, alright, keep your hair on. It isn't hemlock you know.'

Emma blinked and apologised, as the Cooper boy walked across towards her on his hands.

'What on earth are you doing?' she asked.

'Showing off,' said Billy Cooper, upside down.

Emma frowned and walked over to the table where Joan had lit the candles on her cake. Joan raised her hands and took a deep breath :

Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday dear Emmm-aaaah
Happy birthday to you.

The children cheered as Diggery handed Emma the knife and motioned her towards the cake. She looked up at him, pouting slightly then bent forward puffing her cheeks. The children waited, ready to cheer but she stepped backwards and stood frowning, trying to clear her throat. Her parents stared at her and Diggery was about to ask if there was something wrong when she coughed, a little high-pitched whelp, and quite suddenly bent from the waist and blew hard. Ten candles went out. 'Go on Emma,' squeaked a little girl but she shook her head and Billy Cooper jumped forward and blew the last candle almost clear of its holder with an enormous blast of air. Everyone cheered and Emma began to slice up the cake as her mother poured another round of punch. Emma picked up a glass and raised it to her mouth then replaced it on the table without drinking. She watched as the others gobbled their cake and quietly made her way unnoticed out of the room and upstairs to the bathroom.

By the time she returned Joan had organised a game of Blind Man's Buff. The small boy who had been honoured

to be a guest was running round the room, a scarf tied round his eyes. Occasionally he threw himself full length, arms flailing, squealing 'gotcha, gotcha' as the others dodged him and skipped away into corners. The older children stood by the table looking on and sipping their drinks. As Emma entered the room again, the little boy tripped on the rug and staggered into her, grasping her round the waist, shouting happily, almost dragging her to the floor. Emma looked down at him, pulling at his arms in an attempt to free herself.

'Come on darling,' said her father. 'Don't be cross. I'm afraid you're it, so to speak.'

Emma stood quietly as the little boy unwound the scarf and handed it to Diggery. She allowed him to tie it round her eyes. As she was led into the middle of the room she dabbed at her mouth with her sleeve. Diggery began spinning her round and she cried out: 'No, stop. You're making me dizzy.'

'That's the whole point young lady,' said Diggery. 'The aim is to disorientate you.'

'It's alright,' said Emma sharply. 'I'm quite sick enough already thank you.'

Diggery stepped back and allowed Emma to walk forward. She stumbled slightly, her arms held out in front of her. As the children began to move around again, Joan took her husband by the sleeve. 'Don't you think it's time the grown-ups had a little celebration?' From behind her back she produced a bottle of champagne. 'Ta-rum,' she said.

Emma was facing the wall when Diggery popped the cork. She turned round fast, tearing at her blindfold and shouting: 'What was that?'

'It's alright darling,' said Joan. 'Only drinkies for the adults.' As Diggery poured. Emma tilted her head listening. 'Don't please,' she said softly but the children were shouting now and no-one heard her.

'Come on blind man,' shrieked Billy Cooper, 'get on with it.' Emma began to walk forward again and Billy crawled behind her, motioned the others to keep quiet and slapped her hard across the back of the legs.

Emma turned fast, tore the scarf from her eyes and kicked out at the boy, her shoe catching him on the shoulder and spinning him against a standard lamp which toppled to the floor. By the time Diggery reached his daughter she was on top of Billy, her knees pressed into his chest, slapping at him and scratching his face.

'Emma!' He tried to pull her off and for a moment she continued fighting, thrashing her body against him, surprising him with her strength. Finally she tore herself free, the scarf held to her mouth, running past her mother to the hallway and upstairs, fast, stumbling as she clambered on all fours, towards her bedroom.

Diggery helped Billy to his feet and stood staring silently at his wife as upstairs a door slammed.

He turned to the children. 'I'm terribly, terribly sorry,' he said.

It rained heavily that night and Joan was unable to sleep. In the next room Emma lay quiet but Joan kept listening, staring at the wall, ready to leap from bed at the slightest sound. She had had an argument with her husband and finally he had won. It was better to leave it until the morning, he had said, and then they would decide. It was, after all, merely a sore throat and irritation; it could be anything: the excitement of the party, a heavy cold coming, maybe even the onset of puberty. And so they hadn't called the doctor.

Joan lay still until around four o'clock when she slipped into a doze. She was half-asleep when she heard the whimper and jumped awake, wondering for a moment where she was. It was a strange sound, a hoarse coughing noise coming

through the wall. Joan swung herself out of bed, grabbed a robe and ran from the room. She hesitated briefly at Emma's door to listen. The noise had stopped. Gently she pushed the door, feeling her heart pound against the thin material of her nightdress. Cautiously she stepped into the room. The curtains were drawn tightly and it took her a moment to see that the bed was empty.

'Emma,' she breathed the girl's name, almost soundlessly as she ran across the room to the bed and did not see her daughter on the floor until she was on top of her, tripping over her body and falling heavily against the bedside table. She turned, slightly stunned and stifled a scream as she saw Emma's face inches from her own. The girl was sitting on the floor, her back arched into a bow shape so that her stomach pushed forward, her face thrust towards her mother, her eyes bulging, her chin wet and again that curious hoarse cough beginning to grumble in her throat.

Joan gasped and grabbed at her, drawing the girl close to her. At first when she felt Emma's mouth at her throat she thought the girl was crying until the thin body jerked and the teeth closed on her neck.

Diggery awoke to the screams of his wife. It took him a while to gather his senses and a full minute to pull Emma free from her mother and heave her onto the bed, where she lay limp, the breath rasping from her body.

Joan stood up shakily, staring at her husband, then knelt by the bed, stroking Emma's forehead. The girl had fallen into a deep sleep.

Diggery whispered, feeling foolish and inadequate. 'Are you all right?'

'Get the doctor,' said Joan, her voice breaking.

Diggery went downstairs, returned a moment later, looked in, disappeared again and finally tip-toed into the bedroom. 'He'll come in the morning,' he whispered. 'He says there's no advantage in waking her right now.'

Joan said nothing, stood up, took off her robe and climbed into Emma's bed, clasping the girl close to her and she remained motionless for the rest of the night.

Emma awoke first, looking startled into her mother's face and nudging her. Joan sat up, staring into her Emma's eyes. 'It's alright Mummy,' she said. 'I'm fine. I just felt sort of better lying on the floor. It was the rain. It made me feel sort of drowny, as if I was drowning. You know?'

Joan was trembling. 'You're better now?' Emma nodded, got up and began to walk round the room, humming to herself. Joan whispered 'Thank God,' and moved across to the girl, gently leading her out to the bathroom. She turned on the taps and as she fiddled with the plug, Emma stood leaning against the door. Joan reached for the bath salts, poured a capful into the tub and turned on the taps. 'You'll feel better after you've had a good soak,' she said but when she turned she found she had been talking to herself. Emma had gone.

She refused to eat breakfast and wouldn't change out of her dress. Diggery watched her as she sat on the floor, absentmindedly biting her fingers and coughing. He stood up and went to the phone. The doctor wasn't in and he left a message on the answering service. As he spoke he saw Emma come out of the kitchen and walk slowly into the sitting room. After a moment he heard the sound of a tune, a simple little song, used by teachers to show beginners how to deal with the elementary scales.

Emma began to sing in a strange husky voice :

'Motor cycle cops on guard
Chase the cars at speed
Every driver must be sure
Traffic signs to heed.'

Diggery frowned and moved towards the sound. He stood at the door and looked in. Emma was pumping furiously at the pedals, staring at the keyboard, her eyes tight shut.

As she rocked forward, a flower vase on the top of the harmonium began to sway :

'Not so fast darling,' said Diggery sharply. But if she heard, she took no notice.

'Stop on red and go on green
That's the safest way
Motor cycle cops on guard
Laws we must . . .'

Emma screamed as the vase toppled over, showering her with water and when Diggery rushed towards her, she threw herself forward trying to escape the spray, smashing her head into the frame of the organ, and screaming again, falling backwards now, her face bleeding. She collapsed on the floor among the broken splinters of the vase. Joan appeared in the doorway as Diggery picked up his daughter, gently trying to remove a piece of china from her back as she writhed soundlessly in his arms.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stern had had a good month. The International Socialist story had made a spread of words and pictures and there had been congratulations all around, although he would have preferred to have had documentary evidence of the transfer of union funds, rather than just the three taped confessions he had gained when he had spent the weekend at an I.S. seminar. And the fraud story had worked well. The councillor was being investigated and the builder had skipped the country. Stern could afford to lie back for a while and take some time off that was due to him.

He was reading, a glass of wine by his hand, when he heard the flash on the local radio news. He threw his book away and phoned Franklin at the office, but he had missed him. Franklin was out to lunch and not due back for hours. He called Billy Brennan but the little man was out on a job. Stern settled back to read but he couldn't concentrate. He waited for an hour until the next bulletin came through, then pulled on a jacket and drove to the office.

Franklin was surprised to see him and made jokes about his dedication but Stern cut him short.

'I thought these rabies stories were anonymous,' he said.

Franklin shrugged. 'They are, normally. But this was leaked from our end. The Yard I think. It's notifiable you know.'

'Poor kid.' Stern sat on the edge of Franklin's desk, fiddling with a pen.

'You could say it was retribution,' said Franklin. 'A punishment for going off with whores. If the good Lord doesn't get you one way, he'll get you another.'

They watched the early evening news together. The story

was given a big play, the second item announced by the newscaster. Stern listened intently: '. . . eleven year old daughter of senior civil servant admitted to hospital yesterday . . . Regional Hospital Board Secretary this afternoon announced that rabies was suspected . . .'

The scene cut to the hospital entrance where a reporter was talking animatedly into the camera: 'Emma Diggery was bitten by a cat ten weeks ago in France while on holiday with her parents . . . authorities are hunting for a stray cat in the Ardennes region . . . so far proved unsuccessful . . . her mother Joan receiving a course of injections.'

Again a cut back to the studio. Stern wrote the name of the doctor on a piece of paper and scribbled a few notes. He was a small man, bent forward peering at the microphone, scowling as he spoke: '. . . violent spasms of every part of the body . . . rather like electric shock effect through the nervous system . . . equivalent if you like to total cramp, throughout the body, if you can imagine . . . the only infectious disease which is invariably fatal . . . a terrifying experience compounded by periods of lucidity so that . . .' the doctor paused.

'So the little girl knows what is happening,' prompted the interviewer. The doctor nodded.

'Is ten weeks an average period for incubation?'

The doctor shook his head. 'In humans the incubation period can vary from as little as six days to as long as two years, with the average illness lasting four days. In dogs, it's fourteen days to sixty days.'

'Incubation that is?'

The doctor nodded again and the programme moved quickly on to the next item.

Stern whistled. 'Nasty,' he said and looked up as a reporter knocked on the door. He was working on the story and wondered if Stern could tell him anything about Diggery as he was the only one to have met him. They

were talking together when Franklin hissed at them: 'Here's your man,' he said. They looked back at the screen where the news had been interrupted to show Lambert Diggery leaving the hospital, pushing his way through a crowd of reporters. Stern saw Billy Brennan at the back, hopping up and down, waving a notebook.

Diggery's face was set in a frown as he moved fast, head down, the reporters jostling him and squealing questions. He obviously had nothing to say but a final urgent shout reached him as he climbed into his car.

'Have they found the cat sir?'

Diggery looked back over his shoulder and Stern strained to catch his voice. 'I don't know,' he said. 'But there is no danger whatsoever of the disease having been contracted in this country.' As the car moved off Stern looked hard at the screen and frowned.

Diggery got home at nine. There had been nothing to be gained by staying at the hospital. Emma was asleep and wouldn't wake till morning. He drove slowly through town and up the hill to the house. He was thinking of a memo he had written three days ago, timed at four-eighteen on the Friday afternoon. He could remember every line of it and began to count the words. When he had done that, he picked out every third word and spelt it backwards. And so he got home safely, concentrating on trivia, forcing the image of Emma from his mind.

He thought for a moment that there was someone at his gate and wondered if it was a reporter. Surely not. Surely there wouldn't be any reporters hanging around at this time of night . . .?

The house was silent. Joan was upstairs asleep and would probably be unconscious until midday with the injections they had given her. He went to the kitchen, made himself a cup of cocoa and a sandwich and stood munching quietly,

looking out into the woods, listening to the sounds of the night. When he had finished he moved to the drawing-room and switched on the light. The mess on the floor had been cleaned up so that only a slight stain remained on the carpet and it would no doubt wash out, or it could be shampooed, or something. He was about to leave when he caught sight of the harmonium leaning against the far wall, the wood on the facing shattered beyond repair. He stared at it for fully five minutes, gazing at the obscene splash of dried blood on the wood, then sat cross-legged on the floor. And for the first time since he was a child, he began to cry.

Five miles out of town, as Diggery cried for his dying daughter, Ernest and Emily Boman sat in their small living room watching a play on television. They were both fifty years old. Ernest worked at the paper mill and every night they watched television : comedy shows, plays, quiz games, anything they could get until the stations closed down for the night. Emily liked the plays, especially if there was what she called a little bit of 'blue' in them but she wouldn't let Ernest watch BBC 2 because there was every chance that there would be naked women in them, and that was taking things too far. But this play was alright; all about a farmer and his wife and a little boy who had come from nowhere.

Ernest was bored. It was pretty tame stuff. No excitement or laughs in it.

'Where are you off to?' asked Emily as he slowly heaved himself to his feet.

'Kitchen.' As he stood and stretched his arms, his dog jumped to its feet, wagging its tail and looking into his face.

'See,' said Emily, not taking her eyes from the screen. 'He thinks you're taking him out. He'll never settle now.'

Ernest ignored her and left the room, the dachshund

trailing at his heels. In the kitchen he bent to open the fridge door and behind him the dog growled. 'Shuddup,' said Ernest, reaching inside for a beer and noticing in the pale glow from the fridge the shape of a fox standing by the kitchen sink.

'Christ,' he said tumbling over onto his backside.

The fox didn't move. It stood splay-footed, its tongue out, panting, ears pricked, the hair on its back ruffled. For a moment the trio stared at each other, Ernest on his back, the fox blinking, the dog crouched on its belly ready to spring.

'Get him Cocky, you prick,' Ernest croaked and the little dog pounced. The fight lasted only a few seconds : the dog and the fox spun in a quickstep, snapping at each other across the linoleum before the fox bumped into Ernest and hissed at him, leapt onto the sink and struggled through the top of the kitchen window. For a few seconds it was caught, its back legs thrashing, its tail waving as Cocky bounced up and down on the floor, snapping at the air. Then it was out through the window and gone leaving Cocky barking, a speck of blood on its nose, and Ernest struggling to get himself to his feet.

The Emma Diggery story prompted the BBC to rush out a documentary programme which had been planned for the summer. The decision was made on the Monday evening and the Corporation's Press Officers immediately phoned round Fleet Street inviting the television critics and the entertainment reporters along to a preview the next day at lunchtime.

Stern decided to go along and gate crash. He wasn't sure why he was interested. It had little to do with him and he was on holiday. Besides, the Diggery investigation was on ice for a while, at least until all this had calmed down. But something was nagging at the back of his mind

and he wasn't sure what it was – a curious itch and he didn't know where to scratch.

He shared a taxi to the White City with one of the paper's entertainment staff and they had gone through the polite necessities of small-talk before the cab had left Fleet Street. Stern said no more until they reached the studios. He didn't have much time for those who worked on the soft pages and wrote about television programmes, or who was divorcing whom or sleeping with what; if it was a job at all, it was fit only for women and juniors. He knew his opinions were old-fashioned and unreasonable but he didn't care. He was interested only in hard news and the rest could go drown themselves in their precious gins and tonics.

They were shown into a small theatre and, after a short speech by the director, the lights dimmed and they settled back into their seats. Stern reached for his notebook, laid it on his knee and began taking a shorthand note:

'The fox is the main carrier,' he wrote, his eyes shifting from the screen to his pad and back again.

'The disease can spread in a fox population of one animal per square kilometre. In Britain there are four times that many.' Stern whistled through his teeth. . . .

'Much is still unknown about the disease . . .

'There were three thousand post-exposure treatments in France in 1975 . . .

'Experts predict that there will be ten million dogs in Britain by 1980 . . .'

Stern saw the face of the doctor who had been interviewed on television the night before and he underlined his name. He watched as cattle staggered in front of his eyes, spraying saliva as their feet buckled under them. He shuddered as he saw the effects of the disease on an African boy, the child reaching for water, holding the cup

to his lips, then whipping his head away in revulsion, his eyes bulging, his body convulsed . . .

'. . . a series of electric shocks,' he wrote, 'during which time the mind is perfectly lucid . . . a mental crucifixion . . .'

He closed his eyes as the injections were shown '. . . a course of fourteen directly into the stomach wall through the abdomen . . .'

He gazed in horrified fascination as foxes were shot through the head and their lairs gassed.

'The gassing has to be done,' he wrote, 'when the vixen is suckling her cubs . . .'

He rubbed his eyes: '. . . the disease has spread through the north and east of France as far as the Chantille region . . .'

He watched racehorses buck and trot, led by grooms and ridden by stable lads. Again he bent to his notepad. 'The horses are free of the quarantine regulations imposed on other animals . . .' He was scribbling head down and only half noticed something flash across the screen. He wasn't sure what it was and he frowned: something odd, something in the back of his mind; the itch again. When the viewing was over he left the others to their drinks and sandwiches and made his way towards the prettier of the Press Officers. At first she said it wasn't possible but he persisted, smiling and charming her until she led him to the projection room and began fiddling with the controls.

'Where?' she asked, trying to appear officious and irritable.

'Back a bit, where the horses were being exercised . . . that's it, just about here. Now stop the film.'

The horses stood frozen in the frame by a road sign pointing down a country lane:

ETIENNE 2 Kms.

CHAPTER NINE

Billy Brennan was shaking with excitement as he listened to Stern's voice. He had assumed that he had blown his big chance when he had found out nothing about Lambert Diggery and he hadn't expected to hear from Stern again. And so, when the call came through, he had to clear his throat in order to sound calm.

He listened intently to the request, taking down every word Stern spoke and promised to do everything he could, as fast as he was able. The only problem, he said, was this rabies story, which was taking up so much time. Again he listened, nodded, said he was honoured and looked into the receiver for a moment after Stern had hung up.

And then he whooped, a loud yaaaah-hoooo and the others in the office stared at him in astonishment. He, William Brennan, acting as leg-man for Andrew Stern, and on a retainer. All he had to do was get it right and he would have the best chance in the world of getting to Fleet Street. He was in no way offended that Stern hadn't told him why he wanted the information. It was enough that he was asked to do it.

That evening he drove to 'The Gables' and sat in his car gazing up the drive for a few minutes until a woman walked up behind him and crossed the road into the house opposite. Billy waited for a moment before getting out and following her. He took half an hour to talk to the neighbours and then turned his car round and drove to the council estate.

It was the first day Lambert Diggery had voluntarily taken off in his whole career. He had been ill a couple of times and there had been the odd lapse: family occasions, when

Joan had asked him to give his career a miss, just for a day. She had, earlier in their marriage, come out with some clichéd, women's magazine slogans about his putting his career before his family. But he had soon explained: it's not a question of career *versus* family; the two could never be incompatible; to have successful marriages one needed a successful career and *vice versa*. It was obvious. She had soon seen reason and had stopped arguing. Diggery gazed out of the window and wished with all his heart that she was down here arguing now; asking him perhaps to take a day off so that he could take the family out sailing or picnicking, or something . . .

She would have to come down soon. She couldn't stay under sedation for ever, semi-comatose. She would have to come up for air. And when she did, she would need comforting. He wished that she would come dowstairs so that he could comfort her, simply give himself over to taking care of her so that maybe he would divert some of the pain; maybe in thinking of her he might lose a little of his grief, or at least camouflage it; maybe he would not have to see Emma's face all the time as she lay in his arms saying 'make it stop Daddy please' in that strange hoarse voice.

Diggery walked to the window. He ran his fingers through his hair and rubbed his knuckles violently into his cheeks. His skin felt like parchment and his eyes had been dulled by two nights without sleep. He gazed idly at an old car parked at the bottom of the drive and saw Mrs. Wilson pass the drive clumping her stick against the hedge.

For a minute or so he continued to stare out over the garden, thinking of nothing when he saw a man get out of the old car and follow Mrs. Wilson into her house and he recognised him as that obsequious little reporter chap from the local paper, the one he had seen at the gymkhana with Andrew Stern.

Mrs. Phillips, the Diggery's charlady, was a big woman in her forties, cheerful with a loud voice and Billy could just see her leading a kneesup in the pub on a Friday night. She invited him in straightaway and offered him tea and agreed it was a terrible thing about young Emma but surely she would soon get better.

Billy asked general questions at first, feeling his way: how did she get on with Joan? What did she think of the Diggerys in general, adding when she began to look doubtful that he wasn't going to write any of this up; it was just what they called background.

'Well, she's very nice and that but she has to take these pills all the time for her nerves, like. But he's good to her, treats her well and he's very handsome don't you think . . .?'

Billy allowed her to chatter and then slipped in the question.

'A few weeks ago when they came back from holiday, did you go up to the house?'

'Not the first day. Not when she went missing. I went up the day after.'

'And did you find any trace . . .' Billy fingered his tie. 'This may sound odd . . . did you see anything of a dog? Not a dog itself you understand, but maybe dog hairs, that kind of thing. Or perhaps a smell . . .?' Billy stopped, embarrassed. It was a stupid thing to say. But the woman seemed to be taking him seriously.

'She hasn't had a dog for a year or so,' she said thoughtfully. 'It was called Killie because it came from Kilmarnock. In Scotland. Like the pony, the one that died. It came from Bradford.'

Billy rose to leave, refusing another cup of tea. She followed him to the door.

'It was a bit odd though,' she said slowly. 'Emma's carpet had been cleaned. Spotless, it was. You'd have thought it would have been a bit dusty, like the rest of the house.'

'They'd vacuumed it?' asked Billy.

'Mmm. That very morning I shouldn't wonder.'

Billy ran back to his car, whistling all the way home.

Meanwhile in London, Andrew Stern was trying to get through to the number of Gerry Pengelly in Luton and to a café in the Ardennes. When he finally gave up trying he went home. Dorothy was already there, cooking him a meal and as they ate she listened very carefully to what he had to say. When she asked him why he didn't go to the police he told her : he had no evidence; it was nothing more than a hunch.

Later he tried the Luton number again without success and he hoped that Billy Brennan was having better luck.

At last, late on the Wednesday afternoon, Joan left her bed and tottered downstairs. Diggery was sitting at the kitchen table when she appeared in the doorway. He glanced up and tried to fight back the pity and reluctant revulsion that overcame him. She looked terrible. Her body was almost skeletal beneath the dressing gown and her gaunt features which, at their best, could be hauntingly attractive, like a latter-day Deitrich as she liked to say, were now wasted, the eyes too bright, staring straight ahead, the cheeks hollow and the mouth a mere slit, seemingly lipless. She almost stumbled as she sat down and seemed not to hear Diggery ask her if she wanted tea. He stood and leant towards her and she blinked when he stroked her hair.

'I'm going in about five minutes,' he said softly. 'Do you want to come?'

Joan didn't answer.

'I think Emma would like to see you.'

Joan looked up at the mention of her daughter's name, startled as if she had been slapped. Again Diggery asked her if she wanted to go to the hospital and she nodded, stood

up without a word and left the room. Diggery heard her go upstairs as the doorbell rang.

He brushed back his hair and straightened his tie before answering.

'Mrs. Wilson, how are you?'

'I'm so sorry to trouble you,' said his neighbour. 'May I?'

Diggery stood aside to let the woman enter.

'I simply wanted to ask if there was something I could do. Neighbours should, you know. How's Joan?'

Diggery said that she would be down in a minute. He liked Mrs. Wilson in a vague, passive way but he didn't feel like talking. Being polite to people was becoming a strain; courtesy, which in normal circumstances was an automatic reflex, had become a burden. He wanted to be left in peace with his wife and their grief.

'Mrs. Wilson, I don't know how to put this without seeming ungracious but if you could understand. We would rather . . .'

The woman raised her hand in the air and Diggery smiled reluctantly to himself. She looked like a traffic policeman refusing someone entry. I bet very few people have gained entry to you, he thought and immediately wondered how he could begin to imagine such things; the mind was a curious amoral piece of equipment. The woman touched his arm reassuringly. 'I quite understand,' she said turning to leave. 'By the way, what is all this about a dog?'

'What?'

'The young man from the *Advertiser*. He seems to think Emma had a dog or something.'

'Yes, I know about that,' Diggery said sharply. 'It's a misunderstanding; he made a mistake. You know these reporters.'

'Of course.' Mrs. Wilson smiled again, waving over her shoulder as she marched down the drive, swinging her stick and clumping her boots.

They were half way into town when Joan asked who was at the door. Diggery explained and Joan nodded abstractedly.

Diggery glanced at her. 'How are you darling?'

'Alright,' she said. She had made up her face in a failed attempt to mask the haggard features but she'd overdone it and the result was a tragic-faced clown, heavy in mascara and lipstick. As they turned through the hospital gates she said in a quiet voice:

'It *was* the cat, wasn't it, Lambert?'

'Of course,' said Diggery.

'It couldn't have been the dog . . .'

Diggery shook his head. 'Forget the dog, Joan. It didn't exist.'

CHAPTER TEN

Two days later at four thirty on the Friday afternoon, six days after her eleventh birthday, Emma Diggery died. The immediate cause of death was acute vascular collapse. It happened suddenly and although Diggery was called when she went into a seizure and although he drove like a maniac, he was too late to be at his daughter's side.

Billy Brennan stood with the other reporters in the drizzle waiting for Diggery to leave the hospital. Under his arm he carried a copy of the *Advertiser* with a picture of Emma on the front page, the print which Joan had given him and which he had forgotten to return.

When Diggery left the hospital, moving slowly by the side of the hospital Secretary, the reporters left him alone, maintaining a respectful distance while, twenty feet away, on the roof of an outside broadcast van, a television camera recorded the scene for the evening news programme.

Diggery walked straight to his car. He stopped at the driver's door and paused as if he were thinking of something, half-turned towards the reporters, seemed to change his mind, quickly snatched the door open, ducked inside and drove off.

Billy watched him go and, as the others turned to follow the Secretary back into the hospital, he slowly ambled towards his car and drove into town.

Diggery spent two hours seated in his armchair staring blankly at the wall. He should feel relief, he thought. Wasn't that what everyone said? It came as a relief when the patient was finally released into death. The suffering, for Emma, was over and Diggery should have felt relief. In his pocket he fingered the small phial of pills that the

doctor had pressed upon him, despite his protests. He didn't need their crutches, he had told them angrily. Now he sat gently caressing a glass of brandy. The phone was off the hook. He couldn't be bothered with all these people offering their help and their condolences. He took a sip of brandy but choked as he swallowed. Diggery was a moderate drinker, only ever taking spirits at the odd social occasion. Even now he couldn't break the habit.

He put the glass down and went upstairs to see if Joan was awake. He hoped not. She had been under sedation since the Wednesday after the last visit and he didn't know how he was going to tell her. Gently he opened the bedroom door and peered inside. He could hear no sound and was able to see only the top of her head under the sheets. Quickly he moved across to the bed and bent his cheek to her face. Her breath was hardly noticeable. He placed his hand on her brow; cool, gently perspiring but no sign of fever. She couldn't go on like this though. Poor woman, he thought, how would she ever get over it?

He left the room, ran downstairs and into his car and drove fast into town, not sure why he was doing this thing, wondering as he drove, what on earth he thought he could gain by knowing more about it.

The young librarian stared at him in astonishment when he made his request.

'That's funny, that is,' she whispered. 'You're the second one today.' She shook her head. 'I'm afraid we have only the one book, by Bisseru, and the other gentleman took it out this afternoon.'

'What other gentleman?' Diggery asked slowly.

'I've got it here I think.' She flicked through a drawer of tickets. 'Mmm, here it is. Brennan. A Mr. Brennan.' But as she looked up with an expression of mild triumph on her face she saw that Diggery had already turned and was gone and she had been talking to herself.

In a stable yard in Cheshire a young man gazed at his notepad, a worried expression on his face. He looked again at the hounds as they lapped around his feet. He had no need to count them. He knew them individually and there was no doubt that two were missing, the two bitches. He walked into the crowd and they parted to let him through. He stared into the kennels and peered under the benches which were stacked against the stable wall. He frowned, pushed back his cap and scratched his head. The full pack had been together that morning when he had taken them on exercise, and normally they stayed together; even when they were strung out, running at full stretch, they bunched together when the run was over.

He called the hounds to him, locked them away in their kennels and set off into the fields, shouting out the names of the missing hounds.

Billy had been thinking it over for some time and he knew what he had to do. It was more than Stern had asked, above and beyond the call of duty, but if he could find the thing, actually come up with something positive and *physical*, then Stern would be delighted.

After the football match he looked into the office to telephone a short report of the game to the Sunday papers. That done he drove home to his evening meal. When he had finished he pulled on an anorak and a pair of heavy boots, and set off for the wood.

As he drove up the hill he glanced to his left. The sky was heavy with clouds and a wind was getting up. In the dusk he could see the branches of the taller trees swaying. He shivered and for a moment thought that maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. Perhaps he should just forget it and go along to the dancing as usual. They would miss him there. But maybe he could go along once he had found it.

He parked the car in the access lane and got out clutching a torch in his fist, pulling nervously on the zip of his anorak. It was getting dark; the upper branches of the trees creaked and the new leaves hissed in the wind. Billy played his torch on the ground and trudged deeper into the wood, scuffling his feet and occasionally trotting across to the base of a tree and hacking at the roots with the heel of his boot. A squirrel dashed in front of him and scurried up a tree-trunk and Billy stopped, blinking. He turned round to see if there was anyone else around but it was too late for the dog-walkers and too early for the lovers.

He talked to himself aloud: 'Needles in haystacks,' he said. 'Crazy, pointless, silly.' But he continued his search, kicking out at clumps of broken earth and flashing his torch at the bushes. He came to a small dale, a hollow in the ground, and the beam of the torch picked out something hanging and swaying slightly in the wind. He bent down and crawled forward, untied the torn belt from the root of the tree and put it in his pocket. It wasn't much, he thought, hardly what anyone would call a clue, but it was better than going home empty handed. His knees slipped in the mud as he tried to get to his feet and he was staggering slightly when something hit him hard in the back and sent him tumbling down the slope. Automatically he lashed out with his arms and his feet and he caught the little boy on the side of the head with his elbow.

'Fuckin' hell mate.' A thin little squeak of a voice.

Billy opened his eyes and stared at the kid. Skinny, with cropped hair, wearing a sweater and shorts and a pair of gym shoes, rubbing his head with a small fist.

Billy tried to speak but discovered he was breathless. The boy looked up at him and scowled. His name was Kevin he said when Billy had calmed down enough to ask questions. He was from Rotherhithe in the East End. There were

twenty-one of them, come up from London with a social worker, to get a bit of country air.

'They got us playing soldiers,' he said. 'I thought you was the fuckin' enemy.'

Kevin led Billy through the wood to a disused Army barracks where the kids were billetted for the week. The social worker introduced himself as Terence and said he was glad to see a human being after being stuck for days in the jungle with a group of small savages.

When Billy asked for his help he agreed immediately. But he didn't understand why. It seemed a bit odd.

'Was it your dog?' he asked.

'No,' said Billy. 'And it might look a bit nasty. Do you think the lads can handle it?'

'For a fiver this lot would kill anything that moved,' said Terence.

'Yeh, well it's an elderly corpse I'm after. I don't want them running around strangling old ladies' poodles.' He ripped a page from his notebook, wrote down a phone number and handed it over. 'A fiver remember,' he said.

Terence watched him as he walked away from the woods towards his car, and that night Billy dreamed strange dreams of dogs and boys chewing at each other.

The next morning he called on Mrs. Phillips again, gave her the belt and explained what he wanted. At first she was unsure but he pleaded with her and pressed her hand and, eventually, she agreed, although she was not sure why.

Mrs. Phillips always let herself in to the Diggerys' house. She had been given a key two years previously, just a month after she had started work. It was far more convenient, Joan had said, and Mrs. Phillips was quietly flattered that they trusted her so implicitly.

She didn't know whether she would be expected on the Monday, just a matter of three days after the poor little

soul had passed away, but with the funeral due on the Tuesday, she expected that there was a lot of work to be done in the house. Joan would certainly be too distressed to do anything and Mr. Diggery wouldn't know a dustpan from a casserole. She had phoned twice but each time the number was engaged, so in the middle of the afternoon she set off, hoping there would be no disturbing scenes. Should the lady collapse in tears, Mrs. Phillips wasn't sure if she could cope.

Gently she pushed open the front door and hooted a 'coo-ee,' but the house was silent. On the kitchen table she found a note from Joan, written in a fractured scrawl. It said that she wasn't to be disturbed and it apologised for the state of the house but Mrs. P. would understand and she would be paid extra for any additional time it took to clean up. In block capitals Joan had asked her not to go near Emma's room.

The charlady brushed away a tear. She hadn't been in the house since the news of the illness. It was terrible, an awful thing to happen to such a family; if only the place had been a mess she would have gone to work with a will and really cleaned it up properly as if to show that, in her own small way, she was trying to help, to show that she cared for them, but if anything, the house was cleaner than normal. There was hardly anything for her to do.

She made herself a mug of coffee and took it upstairs with her, just to look around. She wouldn't go in to Emma's room but she was curious to know why she was being told to keep away. Joan's bedroom door was shut. Mrs. Phillips stood outside for a moment sipping her coffee and listening. There was no sound. She looked into one of the spare bedrooms but it was spotless. She padded slowly down the corridor and stopped outside Emma's room. There was no harm in at least looking; maybe she could find what the young man wanted just by looking in through the door.

She glanced over her shoulder then pushed the door open. It hadn't been cleaned for a week. Emma's bed was unmade; a ball of tissue lay crumpled on the floor next to a hairbrush and comb. The fitted cupboard was half open but she couldn't see properly inside. She started to shut the door of the room but her curiosity was too strong. Quickly she stepped inside and tip-toed across to the cupboard, reaching inside her housecoat for the belt. She began thumbing through Emma's dresses, biting her lip in concentration.

'What on earth are you doing?'

She turned sharply, one hand held to her mouth, the other behind her back, clutching the belt.

'I told you not to come in here.'

There was nothing she could say. The sight of Joan frightened her, so colourless, her body apparently fleshless under the robe. She tried to say she was sorry but she couldn't form the words and when the question came from Joan: 'what-have-you-got-behind-your-back?' she was reminded of her schooldays with unforgiving teachers asking unanswerable questions. There was nothing else to do. She held out her hand, the belt dangling from her fingers.

Joan sat on Emma's bed and began to weep. 'Why?' she asked softly. 'Why are you doing these things?'

Later Mrs. Phillips realised that there could have been a simple answer. She might have said that she found the belt somewhere and gone straight upstairs to see if it had belonged to Emma. She need not have seen the note. But at that moment her mind wasn't functioning properly. All she could see was Joan's face and all she felt was disgust at herself for being sweet-talked by that young man.

'It was just that he asked me,' she said weakly. Joan didn't look up, didn't say 'who asked you?' didn't attempt to interrogate her in any way. She simply sat there weeping softly through her fingers.

'I'm sorry Mrs. Diggery. He just asked me to see if the belt was Emma's.'

Joan looked up at her.

'The young man, Mrs. Diggery. The reporter.'

Joan mutely held out her hand and the charlady gave her the belt. When Joan spoke, her voice was clear and unemotional. 'I think you had better go now.'

Mrs. Phillips did a strange thing. She curtseyed, just like a maid in a television soap opera. She curtseyed and backed out the door, stumbled down the stairs, picked up her coat and ran from the house. From an upstairs window Joan watched her go then walked across to the telephone and called her husband's office.

It was Kevin's mate who found it. He was wandering in circles, thinking of nothing in particular when he found the fox's lair. To him, it was just a hole in the ground. The fox had left it long ago and there was no new earth disturbed, just a slight mound and the mouth of a tunnel, half caved in, sprouting weeds. Something seemed to be blocking the entrance. The boy looked closely and began to scrabble at the weeds, kicking away the loose earth. He reached in and probed inside the lair with his fingers. He tugged sharply and something came away so that he fell backwards. The boy was a tough kid and hadn't cried since he was six or seven but when he looked at the remains of the dog's ear nestling in his palm, he turned and vomited into the bracken.

None of Diggery's colleagues was unduly surprised when he turned up for work on the Monday. They had expected it. Sally, his secretary, had cancelled a dinner date on the assumption that he would be in and would work late. After all, he had been away from his desk for a week and on Tuesday there was the funeral. The work simply wouldn't

wait; there were some things only he could do, decisions only he could make. No-one would have suggested for a moment that he was being in any way callous and they all made the correct noises, quietly offering their condolences, saying that if there was anything any of them could do, he was only to ask, knowing that there was nothing; and they talked among themselves about how well he had taken it, how at a time like this, character will come to the fore.

But Sally was surprised when, after the call from his wife, Diggery had stood straight up from his desk, saying he had to go. There was still a pile of work to be done, yet he was leaving. Sally assumed that Joan must have finally cracked completely. Nothing less would have driven him away.

On his way to the station Diggery stopped off at the bookshop in Charing Cross Road to buy the book he wanted, and the delay caused him to miss his train. He called Joan from the station and settled down to wait. The bar was just opening and he went in to order an orange juice but surprised himself by asking for a Scotch. It calmed him and he had another. In the train he studied his book, occasionally making notes and muttering to himself.

Joan was there to meet him. Calmly she drove home in the Volkswagen. Her nerves seemed to have disappeared, to be replaced by an unnatural tranquillity. She spoke in a precise monotone, stared directly ahead of her and drove steadily.

Diggery listened without interruption as she explained what had happened.

'I think you should go to his boss. His Editor,' she said when she had come to the end.

Diggery shook his head.

'The police then.'

'No. The man is within his rights. Legally, that is. And I know enough about these parasites to be certain that if I

tried to put pressure on him, he would simply try all the harder.'

'It's the dog, isn't it?' Joan said quietly.

Diggery turned and stared at her. 'Joan, I told you to forget about the dog. You saw the cat bite Emma. You know the authorities are still trying to trace it. Now, please, forget about the dog.'

Joan stopped the car but continued to stare straight ahead. 'But if . . .' she said.

'There is no if!' Diggery was shouting and just for a second he seemed to lose control of himself. 'I'm sorry darling. But I'm afraid we'll just have to let this Brennan, or whatever his name is, blow himself out. He'll stop snooping sooner or later. The only civilised thing to do, the only dignified approach, is to ignore him.'

Joan said nothing and drove the rest of the way home in silence. When they reached the house, Diggery told Joan to go in. He asked her for Mrs. Phillips' address and got out of the car, walked round to the driver's door, opened it for her, kissed her gently as she got out, then swung himself into the driving seat and drove away.

Billy was about to climb out of the car when he saw Diggery at Mrs. Phillips' door. He frowned. Diggery wasn't the type to go round making social calls. Shouldn't he be in Whitehall putting the country to rights? He watched him go to the Volkswagen and drive away. Why the V.W., he thought? A silly notion crept into his mind and he immediately dismissed it, scolding himself for his delinquent imagination.

He gave him a couple of minutes to get clear then he walked up to the charlady's door and knocked. He caught the merest glimpse of her face as she briefly stared at him before slamming the door shut.

Billy stepped backwards, blinking, then bent low and pushed open the letter box.

'Mrs. Phillips.'

Silence.

'Did Mr. Diggery tell you not to speak to me? Mrs. Phillips? It's important, can't you see . . .?'

He could hear her approaching but could see only the bulge of her apron as the flap of the letter box was snapped into his face so that he staggered back and almost fell his length on the path.

That night, as instructed, he wrote down everything he had learnt and posted it to Stern, including the print of Emma, as a bonus, just in case he might need it some time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The funeral packed out the church of St Mark the Apostle. It was a small church, a mile from Diggery's home and for eight years they had taken communion there. Some of Diggery's colleagues had come down from London and the local people gawped at the familiar faces from the news programmes on their television screens, men they had seen ducking out of limousines to go into meetings in London and Brussels.

Billy had got there early, sitting at the back, away from the Fleet Street contingent who kept together, trying to appear unobtrusive, their notebooks nestling inside their song-books so that the vicar's words of condolence could be reported in the papers.

The cortège arrived on time. Diggery stood tall, erect, hatless in the cold wind taking the arm of his wife who walked slowly but carefully, her face veiled from view, eyes staring straight ahead. She wouldn't collapse or be seen to weep. The weeping was behind her. She was dried out, almost serene. As they led the mourners into church, one of the Fleet Street men, doing an 'atmosphere' piece thought he saw Joan stiffen for a second as she caught sight of the small coffin twenty feet away on the altar. In silence they walked to their seats, the vicar turning to greet them, nodding solemnly at them and reaching out to touch Joan's arm and whisper something that was meant to be soothing.

Billy stood with the rest for the hymns, selfconsciously mouthing the words, and he sat motionless as the vicar spoke of the tragedy that had befallen such a fine, upstanding family. He asked for everyone's blessing that the parents would have the strength to overcome their grief. He ex-

plained that God's ways were often difficult to comprehend but that He knew, in His wisdom, why Emma had been chosen so young. Billy noticed Joan's head bow low as the vicar spoke and Diggery turn towards her. Billy looked across the aisle where his colleagues were taking notes, two of them scowling in ill-disguised disgust at the vicar's sentiments.

Finally it was over and four pall-bearers lifted the coffin to their shoulders and walked slowly down the aisle with it, followed by the vicar and the parents. Joan had recovered her composure and again walked faultlessly, lightly holding her husband's arm. Diggery looked neither to right nor left, gazing unblinkingly ahead of him. As the coffin reached the door of the church and the parents passed by the aisle where Billy stood, Diggery turned sharply to his left and saw him. For a moment he stopped, staring at him. Joan stumbled, glanced at her husband and followed his eyes, blinked nervously as she saw Billy then nudged her husband's elbow. Diggery moved on still staring at him before snapping his head round to face forward.

As the congregation closed in to merge behind them, one of the Fleet Street men jostled his way towards Billy and whispered: 'What was that all about?' Billy merely shrugged, but he wondered what Diggery was thinking; his eyes were full of . . . what? Hate? Fear? Suspicion?

Billy was confused. The man had looked so dignified; his only child ravaged by an appalling disease caught from an animal and destroyed from within. His life had been disrupted probably for ever and yet he looked so dignified. Billy began to wonder what he was doing. Perhaps he should leave Diggery alone, leave him with his grief as the vicar had said in the hope that perhaps he would have the strength to overcome it. Maybe he should forget about it. If he had any compassion he would drop all this and stop asking silly questions. If something like this could bother

him, perhaps he wasn't cut out to be a Fleet Street hustler. And anyway, in the final analysis, who wanted to be a heartless hustler? Who needed it?

When he got back to the office, the junior looked at him apologetically and thrust a note in his hand.

Billy let out a roar: 'Christ, Jesus, why didn't you tell me this morning?'

The junior blushed. 'Sorry Billy. I was kind-of busy and I sort-of forgot . . .'

But Billy had gone, clattering down the stairs to the car and bucking away up the High Street.

Billy drove fast up the hill, too fast for safety, spinning the wheel and twisting the old car round the bends. He skidded into the access lane and was out and running almost before the engine had ground to a halt. It took him five minutes to find Terence and he was breathless and spluttering as he handed over the five pounds.

Terence led him to the hut and pointed to a small paper bag lying at the back door.

'I wouldn't look at it if I were you,' said Terence watching him quizzically. Billy ignored him, picked up the bag, sniffed and glanced inside and forced himself not to turn away. 'Mmm,' he said in what he hoped was a disinterested manner, 'it has no belt round its neck.'

'Not that we could find but, like you can see, it came away in bits out of the hole.'

Billy thanked him and waved to the boys as he walked towards the car. Behind him Terence shouted: 'I don't suppose you can tell us what you want it for?'

Billy thought of saying something funny, like he was going to have it for his supper, but instead he turned and placed a finger to his nose and shrugged his shoulders mysteriously. They watched him until he had disappeared into the trees.

Billy placed the bag on the passenger seat, reversed out

of the lane and drove to the phone box, surprised to find that he was shivering. He smiled to himself as he thought of Stern's reaction, then cursed aloud when there was no tone from the receiver. Angrily he slammed it on the cradle and went back to the car. He drove to the pub a mile out of town, waved to the barman and walked straight through to the back and dialled Stern's number. A woman answered, took his name and said Stern was in the bath. Billy said he would call back.

He went to the bar and ordered a large Scotch, ignoring the barman's look of surprise. Normally he laid off spirits, not because he had anything against hard drinking; he simply couldn't afford it. He swallowed it fast, noticing that his hand was trembling and ordered another to fight the nausea and the giddiness. He didn't know what was wrong with him but he supposed it was excitement. He gave Stern fifteen minutes, asked for change and went back to the phone. The number was engaged. He thought of having another drink but decided against it. He would phone from home. As he left, he waved over his shoulder to the barman and breathed deeply as he walked to the car. A mist had risen from the valley and he switched to sidelights as he started the engine.

Driving down the hill he glanced at the package on the passenger seat, just a quick, hurried squint to his left but it was enough. When he turned to his front and saw the old woman on the bicycle wobble round the corner towards him, he was startled and swung the wheel too far; just a minor mistake, but enough, at the speed he was going, to put the car into a spin; and the whisky had affected his judgment so that he over-reacted, spinning the wheel too hard. The car slewed across the road, in front of the woman, bumping the grass verge on the other side, twisting through the hedge and flipping almost lazily over onto its side before rolling gently down the slope towards the canal.

Billy was unable to move. The impact had thrown his head forward snapping his spine just above his shoulder blades and it had scattered the remains of the terrier across the passenger seat so that the dog's skull lay inches from Billy's face; and the last thing he saw before the petrol tank exploded and burnt the life from him was the grin of the jawbone and the dead stare of the eyes.

Half a mile from the spot where the old car lay burning, Lambert Diggery checked that his wife was asleep before entering his daughter's room. He searched among her clothes and picked out a dress. For a moment he looked at it, then took it downstairs, stuffed it into a garbage bag and threw it into a dustbin. He picked up a bundle of newspapers, packed them on top of the bag and tightly snapped the lid on the bin. Then he went to his study and poured himself a whisky.

It was almost midnight and Stern was in the act of making love to Dorothy when the phone rang. He grunted and reached out from under her, ignoring the cheerful obscenities she whispered in one ear as he tried to listen with the other. At first she did not realise that there was anything wrong and she continued to talk to him after he had asked her to be quiet. Finally and brutally he flung her away from him and smashed the receiver onto the cradle.

'There's no need . . .' she said angrily but he interrupted. 'That was the news desk. Billy's dead.'

He explained as she lay silently beside him, and she comforted him when he began to repeat himself, telling him that he couldn't blame himself, stroking his shoulder until he tore free from her, leapt from the bed and ran to the bathroom. Dorothy lay back. It was the first time she had seen him lose control of himself, the first hint of vulnerability.

That night they lay together, wrapped in each other's arms almost motionless, until morning.

When Stern finally awoke he found Billy's letter waiting for him on the mat. He tore it open. It was written as a memo :

'to : Mr. Andrew Stern
from : William Brennan.'

Stern glanced through it, moved to his desk and picked up a slim cardboard file, flipped it open and took out a sheet of paper. He placed it next to Billy's letter and began to compare notes.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In the week that followed Emma's funeral Stern was grateful that his work took him out of town so that he was spared having to make the choice of whether to go and see Billy's mother or not. Instead he sent flowers on the day of the cremation with a letter saying that, in his opinion, Billy would have made a top reporter. He didn't know whether or not this sentiment would comfort her and he resolved to visit her sometime in the future.

Twice that week, late at night, he called Dorothy but there was no reply, and he remembered what she had said a few nights earlier when he had asked her out on a whim, at the last moment. She was busy, she had said, and if he wanted to book her, he would have to make arrangements in advance with her social secretary. Twice that week he was aware of an unaccustomed twinge of displeasure which might have been jealousy and he wondered if perhaps he was growing old.

He returned to London on the Tuesday, exhausted. It had been a hard week with little sleep and it was this that partly accounted for his becoming uncharacteristically drunk. He spent two hours at lunchtime drinking with some contacts at the Yard, two big coppers he had known since they were detective constables and who enjoyed a few Scotches with him, knowing they would not have to put their hands very deeply into their pockets. From there he had gone straight to an afternoon party in a club off Fleet Street. One of his colleagues was leaving and had bought two hours of champagne. At opening time the group had moved to the office pub and it was there in the early evening that Dorothy finally tracked him down by phone.

He had to concentrate hard in order to appear sensible.

'What's that din?' she was asking.

'Singing,' he said. 'Bit of a party and things.'

He cupped a hand over his ear as she explained that she was phoning from home and that if he was still interested, there was a strange story about a fox. Stern shook his head, trying to clear the confusion from his brain.

'I'm talking about your hunch,' she said, sounding irritable.

'Of course. Tell me more,' he said.

There was nothing to tell but she knew where to find out, if he felt like coming down. He said he would be with her in a trice, blew a kiss down the phone and hung up. He had some difficulty in leaving. The reporter who was giving the party had thrown an arm round his neck and was telling him, face to face, man to man, showering him with spittle and forcing a drink into his hand, that he, Andrew Stern was the best reporter in Fleet Street; absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt. . . . But eventually he got away, and then had to think where he'd left his car. He drove carefully through the London streets and kept well within the speed limit on the motorway, fighting to clear his mind of the booze by going over the letter that Billy Brennan had sent him.

As he turned off the motorway into the darkened minor road leading towards town, he shuddered and noticed his palms were slipping on the steering wheel. At the crossroads where he had to make a left turn, he found himself spinning the car around as if to go back the way he had come and he had to force himself to swing the car up the hill towards the woods where the Diggerys lived. He began to talk to himself, shouting out the words.

'What's wrong with you, you fool? It's the drink. The booze is driving you mad.' He tried to picture Dorothy's face but he couldn't bring it into focus; all he could see was

the little girl, her serious expression as she walked next to him that day and the attempt she made at sophisticated indifference when she had told him about having the Prime Minister to tea; and the quick glance she had shot at him to see if he had been impressed; the small, solemn face trying to convince him that having the P.M. to tea was something any bright ten-year-old was able to cope with.

And then Billy; blushing when Dorothy made a fool of him. Stern was glad to get out of the country lanes and finally arrrive in town. But he wished it wasn't so quiet. He felt like being in crowds, with lively, crazy, drunken, foolish people.

Dorothy was waiting for him in the saloon bar. She smiled as he came in and recoiled as he kissed her.

'Whisky,' he said.

'I gathered that,' she replied.

'No. I mean, I want one. And quickly.' He rubbed his hands together 'Tell me I look as though I've seen a ghost,' he said.

'Certainly not. I'm here to tell you about foxes.'

And so she explained, leading him through to the public bar to meet George, an elderly customer who sat by the darts board, sipping dark beer.

Stern had to listen to a host of stories before he finally got the old man on to the fox. It had walked straight into the old boy's kitchen, he said, plain as day and just stood there till the old dachshund got a hold of it and there had been a fair old scrap, so he'd heard.

At first he wouldn't give Boman's address. He was suspicious, wanting to know what was going on but Stern bought him a drink and persuaded him, thanked him and moved back to the saloon where he gulped down a Scotch to stifle the bile that was rising in his throat. Then he took Dorothy's hand and led her outside to the car.

As they settled in their seats she looked at him, wondering

if he was capable of driving. She asked him but he merely grunted. As they drove out of town she asked what it all meant and he shrugged.

'Could be nothing,' he said. 'But if you think of a hunch as the proverbial jig-saw with a few missing pieces, then this might be a part of the puzzle. According to the books, rabies induces a change in behaviour patterns. Domestic pets tend to become aggressive while wild animals turn placid.' He squinted into the driving mirror, trying to recall the words Billy had written: 'They lose their fear of man and are frequently seen to approach their enemies placidly.'

Dorothy shivered. 'The fox and the dachshund.'

'Ten out of ten my dear,' said Stern.

Dorothy leant her head against his shoulder. 'Are you ever wrong, Scoop?' she asked.

'Rarely,' he said.

When Ernest Boman's doorbell chimed at ten-thirty in the evening he looked quickly across at his wife. He couldn't remember the last time the bell had rung at night. They hadn't many friends and they always used the phone, never dropping in unexpectedly. And it was an isolated spot, not like in town where people would bother you for no reason.

His wife frowned but said nothing. The bell rang again and she made shoo-ing motions at him, waving her hand, ordering him silently to go to the door and get rid of whoever it might be. She watched him go and sat on the edge of her seat, fidgeting. She heard the door open and the sound of a man's voice. She cocked her head to listen but could not make out what he was saying, just that he was talking slowly, a long speech, punctuated by grunts from Ernest. The voice seemed to be getting higher now. The man sounded angry. Finally the door slammed with a smash

that made her jump and Ernest came red-faced into the room.

'The cheek,' he said.

'Go on, then,' she said. 'Who was it?'

'Said he was a reporter. Asked if Cocky had been behaving odd.'

'Did you tell him?'

Boman nodded. 'Didn't see why not. I told him he was chained up in the yard. Then the bugger asked if he could have him tested.'

'Watch your language,' said Emily sharply.

'Cheeky sod.' Ernest sagged into his chair and stared at the screen. He sat motionless, scowling, occasionally muttering under his breath while his wife told him to be quiet and forget it.

'He'd been drinking an' all,' he said.

'Hold your tongue, Ernest.'

But he couldn't concentrate on the programme. He stood up and walked round the room, ignoring his wife's instructions to sit down. Angrily he left the room, wandered through the kitchen and opened the back door. At first he didn't see the movement but when his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he gasped. The shock of what he saw rooted him to the spot and by the time he had begun to run, he was too late. All he could see were the tail lights of the car disappearing down the road, and the empty chain lying against the wall.

Dorothy sat panting in the passenger seat, watching Stern as he concentrated on the curves in the road. Behind her she could hear the muffled whining of the dog in the boot.

'Do you think that was wise?' she asked when she had got her breath back.

'Probably not,' said Stern. 'A calculated risk, one might say.'

'You don't think it will suffocate in there do you?'

Stern shrugged. 'Doesn't matter if it does. They cut their heads off when they test them. In Weybridge. That's where we're going.'

'What?' Dorothy squeaked. 'You didn't mention that to Boman.'

'Certainly not.'

She looked at him and moved back closer to the door. 'You're not a very nice person are you Andrew?'

Again he shrugged.

He drove carefully through the lanes towards town, the headlights occasionally flushing out small animals who dashed for cover into the hedges and the ditches.

At a set of lights she nudged him. 'Your wrist's bleeding.'

Stern looked down at his hand and gasped. He said nothing, just swallowed hard and glanced at Dorothy. She was sucking her thumb.

'It didn't get you too did it?' he asked and his voice was hoarse.

She shook her head. 'Not me. I'm forever cutting myself on tins and things. It just kind of slobbered over me, when we were dragging it up the path.'

She looked behind her, straining to listen for any noise coming from the boot, but Cocky was silent. When she turned back the lights had changed and Stern was moving the car forward, groping with one hand in the glove compartment and pulling out a half bottle of whisky. As he changed gear with one hand he raised the bottle to his mouth with the other and took a long slug.

'For God's sake Andy,' Dorothy spoke sharply. When he said he was taking her straight home, she was relieved. She had had enough for one day.

'You're not really going to Weybridge are you?' she asked as she got out.

Stern nodded. 'And then to the hospital.' He gazed up at her. 'I might not see you for a while,' he said.

'Suit yourself.' She turned abruptly and ran up the path. Stern realised that she had misunderstood and he thought of running after her to explain, but there was no time.

As soon as he reached the motorway he pushed the accelerator to the floor and began to weave from lane to lane cursing the vehicles that wouldn't get out of his way. He hadn't gone very far when a police car turned off the hard shoulder and screeched after him and he didn't see it coming because concentrating on the road ahead. When the car appeared alongside signalling for him to stop he got such a shock that he did a stupid thing. He tried to get away....

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stern awoke to the clash of a heavy key in a lock and a cheerful voice telling him to move his body. He didn't open his eyes. If he kept them closed, all this would go away; soon he would awake fresh and clean in his own bed and pour himself an orange juice and prepare himself a cooked breakfast.

'Come on sunshine. You got some pleading to do.'

Stern grunted as the constable shook his shoulder. So it was real. Of course it was real. He got up, crouching, eyes still closed, his head buzzing and aching, the unfamiliar horror of a hangover in a police cell booming in his brain. The inside of his skull felt bleach-dried; his mouth, eyeballs, nostrils seemed as if they had been sandpapered during the night. When he tried to ask for tea, he merely hiccupped a meaningless little croak.

'Same to you squire,' said the policeman.

Slowly he stood up, leant against the wall and nodded when he was told to wash in the lavatory and then report to the duty sergeant. He slowly felt his way out of the cell and walked carefully down the corridor, trying to move his tongue around the cavern of his mouth, squinting in the glare of the early morning neon.

As he splashed the cold water onto his face and gargled it around his throat he tried to remember, but all that came back was the chase along the motorway, skidding into the hard shoulder and the policeman looking in the boot.

His body was aching all over. He groaned as the water sprayed over his fingers and his knuckles smarted as the blood began to trickle again and he remembered throwing the punch . . . but he had missed the copper's chin, hadn't

he? He had missed and rammed his hand into the windscreen; at least that was something in his favour. He hadn't actually thumped a policeman.

The small puncture marks on his wrist were no longer bleeding. He shook his head and shivered, clutching the dull ache in his bicep where they had given him the anti-tetanus injection. His face, peering back at him from the mirror was ravaged and blotched; he combed his hair as well as he could with his fingers and retched into the basin.

'Driving under the influence. Disorderly conduct,' said the Duty Sergeant as Stern gave his name. Stern shrugged and the sergeant grinned at him. 'How about police assault and dog-napping then, just for afters?'

'Have they found the dog?' Stern asked, trying not to yawn in the man's face. He shook his head. 'Could be anywhere couldn't it? It didn't half give young Brooks a fright when it jumped out of your boot, so I'm told.'

'It's got rabies, you know.'

'Oh yeh.'

'Maybe I'll use that as my defence.' Stern said, pulling on his jacket.

'Not unless you're pleading insanity, my son. Now disappear will you.'

Stern nodded and followed the constable out of the building to the van that was waiting to take him across the road to the courthouse.

The dog had spent the night in the fields. For a couple of hours it had sniffed around the verges of the motorway until the irritation in its brain began to take effect. It shook its head and began to run along the side of the road, back the way it had come, towards the town, occasionally stopping to look up as the headlights from cars and lorries dazzled its eyes. It came to a canal and turned away from

the road, running alongside the water and scampering across a small bridge, paused for a moment to draw breath and set off again in a straight line. Every few minutes the dog leapt and twisted, snapping at the air and clashing its teeth together. Once it stopped and gnawed at its tail, biting through the fur to the gristle, spinning in a solo dance until it made itself dizzy and sat down, panting. Again it got to its feet and began to run, faster this time, through the fields, crawling under hedges until finally its lungs heaved and it collapsed, stretched out and fell asleep.

It was wakened by the sound of a human voice and the tapping of a stick. The dog shook its head and looked towards the sound, its ears pointing forward. Slowly it stood, swaying a little, and padded the ten yards towards a hedge, sniffing, its ears twitching, the small tail held erect.

A woman was standing by a bus stop holding tightly to the reins of a big golden labrador. She absent-mindedly tapped a white stick on the pavement. The big dog sat staring ahead, its nose pointing into the wind so that it neither saw nor smelt the dachshund until it felt the claws in its back and the teeth snapping around its neck.

The big dog howled and staggered to its feet, shaking its head to free itself as the woman screamed and pitched forward, waving her stick in the air. Still snapping and snarling, the dachshund slipped to the pavement and stood panting, a ludicrous little figure, its belly almost brushing the ground, snarling a fierce challenge at the startled guide dog. For a moment the big dog was confused, torn between the instinct to attack its tormentor and the years of conditioning and training to protect the blind woman. Briefly it looked back over its shoulder as the woman whimpered its name and the dachshund leapt for its throat, catching the big dog at chest level and snapping. Again the labrador howled, this time turning to gouge a gash out of the dachshund's shoulder. The woman screamed as her dog leapt forward.

She lost her grip on the harness as she sprawled in the gutter shouting 'Goldie, please!' and all she could hear was growling and howling and the snapping of teeth.

Stern returned to the office just after lunch. On the train up to town he had drunk two Bloody Marys and by the time he walked through the doors, the hangover had been replaced by a faint light-headedness and a euphoria which he knew from experience would be short-lived. Franklin looked up as he came in.

'Nice drive up?' he asked.

Stern pulled a face at him and slumped into a chair as Franklin reached into a filing cabinet and held up a brandy bottle. Stern took a sip and lay back, cradling the bottle in his arms.

'What was the damage?' Franklin asked.

'A hundred quid and a year on foot.'

'Could have been worse.' His tone was sympathetic but Stern knew that he was waiting for some sort of explanation. He reached into his pocket and flipped a piece of paper across the desk. Franklin swung back in his chair studying it.

'So this is what you've been up to?' he said quickly.

'Yes. Remember I asked you if I could use young Brennan to do some digging?'

Franklin nodded, and Stern continued. 'Right. My part of it first. Are you ready? Diggery was lying when he told me that Emma didn't have a dog. Then there was the pâté tin. Her mother said she hated pâté, yet the tin was lying empty in the bin. Next, she called her dog Etienne and Billy discovered that she named all her animals after the places she found them . . .'

'So what?' Franklin interrupted, still staring at Stern's notes. 'If she had a phantom dog, she'd have given it a phantom name.'

'I agree,' said Stern, 'if it *was* a fantasy. But Billy went round the neighbours on my instructions and they all said that she was a down-to-earth kid, practical, sensible. It's not in character.' He paused for a moment. 'Also from Billy: the charlady, a Mrs. Phillips, noticed that Emma's bedroom had been cleaned up the day after they came back from France although the rest of the house was dusty.'

Franklin shook his head. Stern took another swig of brandy and continued. 'Then there was Diggery's odd reaction at the gymkhana when he saw me. And again at hospital, on the news, remember. He said that Emma could not have picked up the disease in this country. And no one had asked him. He just came out and said it, unsolicited.'

Franklin ran his fingers through his hair and flipped the note back towards Stern. 'It doesn't exactly pin me to the wall,' he said, a trace of weariness in his voice.

Stern shrugged. 'Billy had come up with something else too, but the silly little sod had to go and get himself killed.'

Franklin looked up and saw that Stern was biting his fingers and shivering. He had never seen him like this before. Even in the middle of the most difficult stories, he was always the calm one.

'And based on this,' he said softly, 'you went and nicked a dog?'

'Afraid so. I'd heard that a fox had walked into a house all friendly which is consistent with the disease and, you'll admit, unusual. Fox fights dog and disappears, dog subsequently goes barmy, snapping at the air and drooling and the owner chains him up.'

'You talked to the owner?'

'I thought I might convince him to have the dog tested.'

'But he wouldn't, so you thieved it.'

Stern nodded. Franklin stood up and slowly walked round the room until he was behind Stern's chair. 'It's not much,

is it? Nothing that you'd call concrete.' He patted Stern on the shoulder. 'Are you owed any time off?'

'You know I am. Months and months.'

'Then I suggest you disappear for a while. Lie low, as they say in the movies. You've been working hard and . . .'

Stern interrupted. 'Name one thing that would convince you.'

Franklin was silent for a moment. 'Someone goes down with rabies.'

'Right,' said Stern rising to his feet and held up his fist in a salute so that Franklin could see the bite on his wrist. For a moment Franklin looked puzzled; then he leant heavily against the wall. 'Jesus,' he said softly. 'Holy Jesus.'

At the reception desk to Casualty, the nurse was confused.

'If you've had the tetanus jab, then that's all you need,' she said. She was trying to be patient with the man. He was certainly charming enough, not like some she had, coming in and demanding all sorts of things, just because they had paid their National Insurance stamps.

'Just let me see a doctor, will you?' Stern smiled, losing patience himself but knowing, from years of experience, that if you kept smiling, kept playing at being pleasant, then eventually they would give in. She sighed at him and gestured at a young doctor who was passing. He came across and frowned at Stern, scarcely raising his eyes from his clip board and reluctantly allowing himself to be dragged into a corner.

The nurse watched as the man argued for fully five minutes before the doctor finally pushed him away and watched as he walked slowly out into the car park.

The doctor stood scowling for a moment before walking smartly back to the desk, scolding the nurse for bothering him with such a man.

'What did he want anyway?' asked the nurse.

'An injection for rabies,' grunted the doctor. 'How sick can you get?'

Later when Stern phoned Dorothy, she sounded mildly hysterical and he had to calm her. 'At least you'll be okay,' he said at last, when she had stopped trembling. 'It didn't bite you did it? You said it didn't bite you.'

'No,' she said. 'I told you. It just slobbered all over me.' There was a pause. 'You're going to come down tonight Andy, aren't you?'

'Just try and stop me,' he said. And in the cab taking him out of London he was glad that the driver was talking football all the way; anything to keep his mind off it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The news that Andrew Stern had moved into town and had hired the services of a mini cab reached Brussels the same afternoon. The man who was paid to keep an eye on Stern had called his contact number from a coin box and was thanked for his information. When the men in Brussels learnt of it, they held a short meeting and a message was dispatched back to London. That same afternoon a greetings card was delivered to Lambert Diggery's office by hand, marked 'Private and Confidential'.

Sally Brownlow, Diggery's secretary, laid it unopened on Diggery's desk, idly wondering what the occasion was. Had she looked inside, she would have been mystified. It was a plain white card with the single word 'GREETINGS' on one side and a message, stamped by a children's print set on the back:

'Pigeon now unsafe so no further contact.
M. sends her regards but is henceforth
unavailable.'

When Diggery had read it, he tore the card in tiny pieces and threw them in his bin. He sat at his desk trembling, constantly wetting his lips and stroking his temples with his fingertips, the word 'unsafe' flashing through his mind again and again, until he closed his eyes and screamed silently, his head throbbing with pain, and his stomach churning in unrelieved tension.

Before catching the train to town Stern had bought a number of books in London. He sat in his room, carefully going through them and making notes on a pad. As he worked

he sucked at his wrist and scratched at the tiny puncture marks. At one point he searched through the index of the largest book until he found 'symptoms'. He turned to the page but read only the first paragraph before snapping the book shut. He was not yet ready to know the details.

When he had finished he made a phone call to Weybridge and arranged to see Professor Sax the next day. And in the evening he took Dorothy out to the cinema. But he couldn't concentrate on the film and later that night he woke up sobbing in the middle of a terrible dream and she had to soothe him and clasp her arms round him as if he were a baby before he could get back to sleep.

He was half an hour early at the laboratory and there were no magazines to read. He walked round the reception area, smiled at the woman behind the glass, whistled a tuneless noise and glanced at a poster taped to the wall:

SMUGGLING
PETS COULD
BRING
RABIES
INTO
BRITAIN

... the words were superimposed over a skull.

And another, on the adjoining wall:

RABIES
IS A KILLER

in red and green, like an advertisement for a horror film. Stern picked up an information booklet and began to read:

> A horrifying feature of rabies in humans is the uncertainty of the incubation period which can vary from a few days to many months. A person exposed to rabies may be given a course of preventive injections but these can be extremely unpleasant and not always successful.

Stern whistled through his teeth, dropped the pamphlet

and noticed that he'd been rubbing his wrist and that the small wound had become inflamed.

He was gazing at it when the receptionist called out his name.

Sax arrived frowning. He was a small man with a receding hairline, scuffed shoes and a lab-coat over sweater and jeans. He looked over Stern's shoulder as he introduced himself.

'Good of you to spare . . .' Stern said to Sax's back as the little man scampered away again down the corridor. Stern followed him into a small room, more of a cubicle, with barely space enough for a workbench, a desk and chair and a bookcase. The room was painted a dull shade of green and there was no concession to any form of decoration.

'Come here, come here.' Sax waved Stern over to the bench and stood back, allowing him to peer into a microscope.

'So that's it,' said Stern, quietly. 'The little sod.'

'Shaped like a bullet, as you can see.'

'But deadlier,' Stern stared fascinated at the virus.

'Mmmm,' said Sax behind him. 'It's a bugger.'

Stern stood back from the microscope blinking. 'And where do you do the tests?' he asked.

Sax waved a hand in the air. 'Round the corner,' he said. 'The fluorescent anti-body tests. You'll know what I mean if you've been reading it up. A microscope with a dark field condenser and an ultra-violet light source.'

'And accuracy?'

'One hundred percent if positive.' For the first time Sax looked Stern in the face. 'But you wanted something didn't you?'

Stern knew he had to be careful if he wanted to get the man's co-operation. He had prepared a little speech.

'If I may put this hypothetically . . .'

'Good,' said Sax. 'I like hypotheses. Not so messy as reality.'

Stern smiled and cleared his throat. 'Let us assume then that rabies had been introduced into this country but is so far undetected. Perhaps a few foxes have contracted it, being the principal vectors.' Stern paused to see if Sax seemed impressed but he didn't react. 'Let us suppose it has been in the country for almost three months; you're with me so far?'

'Of course,' said Sax sharply.

'Right. Let us suppose, given this situation, that someone was to come to you with a bagful of beasts for the purposes of testing.' Again Stern paused. 'Then what?'

'I'd open the bag to see what sort of beasts were in there.'

'And what sort of beast would you like to see?'

'Foxes of course,' answered Sax quickly. 'Dogs and cats.' Again he looked hard at Stern. 'But I assume our hypothetical hunter wouldn't be running around stealing pussies?'

Stern smiled. 'I shouldn't think so for a moment. But what about rats?'

Sax shrugged. 'Any warm-blooded mammal can get it of course. Rats are controversial. If you've read the Waterhouse report you'd know that. But I'd hate to think of sewer rats catching it. A horrifying thought, don't you think?' Sax turned back to his workbench, muttering gently to himself.

Stern leant over his shoulder. 'And if someone were to hypothetically turn up with such a bag, how much would he be charged, do you think?'

Sax didn't move. 'Hypothetically, nothing,' he said staring into his microscope. 'In reality, who knows?'

Stern smiled and said he'd see himself out. He was about ten feet up the corridor when he heard Sax call his name. He turned to see the little man peering at him from his door.

'Mr. Stern, what makes you think there's rabies in England?'

'Just a hunch. That's all. If you wish, I'll explain . . .'

But Sax simply shook his head and disappeared back into his cubby hole.

Diggery's doctor had suggested after the funeral that he take a holiday, give Joan a few days away from it all. He had said it automatically, the standard words of advice to the bereaved, and he had been shocked when Diggery called him a fool, reminding him that Joan was forced to stay in town to receive the injections. The old GP had realised at once that he had overlooked the matter but he was startled nonetheless by the violence of Diggery's reaction, a man normally so urbane and controlled.

For his part Diggery had decided that the only thing to do was to use his work as therapy and his office as a clinic; that was the way to do things. In the days immediately following the funeral he put in ten hours at his desk and he worked on the train, both ways. In the evenings he ate a late supper with Joan and when the meal was over she came to him and lay on the sofa, her head nestling in his arms. She would weep quietly and go to bed before midnight. There were no traumas, no sudden outbursts of emotion, just the incessant drizzle of grief. Occasionally Diggery wondered if their daughter's death would bring them closer together or if the silences were driving them apart. He didn't know but for the moment he was glad that things were quiet.

On the evening after the funeral Joan took him by the hand and led him to Emma's room. She opened the door and guided him inside. The bed was still unmade, the piece of tissue and the brush and comb were lying on the floor. The cupboard was open and Emma's dresses arranged just as they had been, with a raincoat over a hanger, its belt

draped round a blouse on a nearby hook. Joan stared hard in her husband's face and made him promise never to have the room cleared up.

'I want to leave it like this,' she said solemnly. 'For always.'

Diggery took her hands and kissed them. He had half expected something like this. He'd read about such things, or maybe he'd seen a documentary on television; whatever it was, he could understand. It was the desire for a shrine, something tangible to use as a guide to memory; something like that. And the doctor had warned that she might act oddly for a while until the initial shock had been absorbed.

Diggery knew that there was medical disagreement on how to handle such things. There was the sharp aggressive treatment, slapping faces and telling them to get over it. And there was the passive reaction, leaving the patient to sort out the problem in his or her own way, neither pampered nor cossetted but merely given the chance to work out the problem without interference. Diggery chose the second method. Maybe it would have been better to slap her face, but he doubted it. The second way was preferable, at least for now. And besides, he was exhausted. Too exhausted to do anything but patronise her.

They had developed a routine and it surprised Diggery when after supper, a week after the funeral, she didn't come over to him and put her arms round him. Instead, she sat by the bureau staring at a book. Diggery shrugged and stretched himself out in the armchair by the fire, his newspaper on his lap, half asleep.

'Lambert,' her voice was clear, almost a shout. 'It says here that one can get it directly from the saliva.'

Diggery sat up. 'What?' He shook his head to clear the drowsiness. 'What are you reading?'

'It says here that you don't actually have to be bitten by a rabid animal.'

Diggery saw that she was reading the book he had bought in London.

'. . . you can contract it by being licked on the face . . .'

Diggery was on his feet and, in a few strides, crossed the room to his wife's side. 'Joan, why are you reading . . .?'

'It says here . . .' she interrupted, speaking in a clear monotone, clutching the book in front of her, gripping the pages. Diggery reached out a hand towards her but she pulled the book away. 'It says here that the saliva from a rabid animal can enter the bloodstream through a cut, an old cut that is, and travel towards . . .'

'JOAN!' Lambert shouted, surprising himself. He never shouted at his wife but she hardly seemed to notice. Instead she continued to read silently, twisting away from him, holding the book high in front of her. Finally, as he lunged at her, she spun off the stool and stood facing him, the book behind her back. 'You know what this means Lambert?' she said in a soft voice. 'It means that the dog could have done it. The dog could have done it without even biting her!'

She drew her arm back, flung the book across the room and ran from him, stumbling up the stairs and sobbing.

It was early afternoon when Stern arrived back in town after the meeting with Sax. He whistled as he walked from the station, feeling light-headed and energetic, eager to put his plan into operation. He remembered enough from an interview he had once done with a doctor to know that this elation would be short-lived. It was the adrenalin speeding through his system, fighting the fear that he couldn't suppress, the terror that maybe, inside him, the bullet-shaped virus was lying asleep, biding its time before it drove him mad. But meanwhile he planned to make use of the adrenalin, make the most of it while he had it.

He boosted himself further with a large whisky at the

station pub and called a cab, giving the driver the address of a farm near town, the one which bordered the meadow by the wood. The farmer was out and at first his wife was suspicious. She thought he was trying to sell her something. And even when he offered her ten pounds for the job, she still refused to let him in. Anyone offering money for dead foxes must be out of his mind, she thought. But eventually she agreed to take the money and the note he had scribbled for her husband. She watched as the cab drove away, wishing she had had the nerve to ask him what in God's name he wanted dead foxes for.

By the time he got back to town the County Buildings were closed. He took the cab to the library but it was the half-day. He cursed long and loud. The adrenalin had dried up in him and his head ached. He decided that the next part of the operation would have to wait until the following day.

That night, two miles away in a patch of rough ground by the railway line, Cocky the dachshund staggered to a halt. Its legs would no longer carry it. For a mile it had stumbled, its front legs useless, trying to drag its body forward, turning occasionally to bite at the gash on its shoulder where the labrador's teeth had struck home. Finally the dog came to a ditch that had been dug some months before and had been left open. It vomited into the earth and crawled on its belly until it found a piece of piping wide enough to enter. Slowly the little dog crept inside, away from the noise and the dim light from the stars, creeping forward towards silence and blackness until it could go no further. Cocky sighed, laid its head on its paws and died.

In Brussels Lambert Diggery excused himself early from dinner and his colleagues rose from the table to watch him leave. They could understand that he wanted an early

night. Some of them had been surprised that he had made the trip. The meeting had not been so important that one of the administrative staff couldn't have handled it. There were no decisions to be taken; merely a backgrounder, a briefing. But he'd insisted on coming, arriving off the mid-day flight and sitting in silence through the meeting. They knew at the Department that Sally had booked him back on the evening flight and they were astounded when he had announced that he was going to stay overnight. Shouldn't he be home with his wife at a time like this? One of the younger men suggested that perhaps he had a woman in town but he was told to mind his tongue.

Diggery had taken the cab to his hotel, then walked quickly away towards the apartment block where Monique lived. It was early, only ten-thirty, but she had not answered his call and he needed to find out what was going on.

The doorman was a stranger. The old man had been replaced and this was a younger man. Diggery was walking past the desk when the man held up his hand and asked who he wanted to see. Diggery looked down at him, sniffed contemptuously and said: 'I beg your pardon?' He spoke in English and the young man smiled at him, replying in English. 'I said, sir. Who did you want to see?'

Diggery thought for a moment, then gave Monique's number.

'And your name sir?'

Again Diggery paused. He had always been anonymous in this building. There had never been any need to identify himself.

'Just say Lambie. Mr. Lambie.'

The young man's smile widened and he moved towards the wall, pressed a button, waited and spoke into a grill, keeping his eyes fixed on him. He spoke quickly, said 'okay', smiled and leant towards Diggery.

'She is unavailable, I'm afraid.'

Diggery turned sharply and began to make for the elevator.

'Mr. Diggery.' The voice was harsh and for a moment Diggery stopped, then began to run for the stairs. But the young man was faster and blocked his path.

'She says no, Mr. Diggery.' The doorman was staring into his face, a hand gently laid on his arm. Diggery pushed him hard on the shoulder but the younger man was ready for him and the punch to the kidneys was a brutal one, with the knuckle of the middle finger protruding and twisting as it hit the flesh. Diggery gasped and slumped forward and the doorman caught him under the shoulders and dragged him back through the hall. As they passed a middle-aged couple, he could hear the man explain that he was sick and had to be rushed to hospital.

Diggery was still in agony as the taxi driver helped to lay him in the back seat and he realised that he would never see Monique again when the doorman gave the driver the name of his hotel . . . and the room number.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Stern was glad to be awake and see the morning sunlight struggle through the grime on his window. He had slept badly again, assaulted by nightmare in which he was the little African boy in the television documentary, reaching out for a pint of beer in the pub and staggering backwards, recoiling from the glass and the barman making silly jokes. Twice he had wakened in a sweat. He hoped the dreams would fade his mind. He could just about control the fear during the day, consciously banishing it, concentrating on the job he had to do. But at night there was no defence.

It was a fine morning and he would have liked to walk to the Town Hall but there was no time for such luxuries. The cab came on time and waited for him as he checked the maps in the council library. He made a note of the positions he wanted and gave the driver the address of the Chinese restaurant. On the way he asked himself if there wasn't a simpler way; but if there was, he couldn't think of it. When he had collected all he needed he asked the driver to take him home. The route took him past The Gables and the cab stopped, Stern got out and looked up the drive, staring at the house for a moment before ducking back inside.

Joan Diggery was talking to her neighbour Mrs. Wilson, in the gateway of the Wilsons' drive and when she saw Stern she frowned and put her hand to her mouth, chewing her thumbnail and ignoring her neighbour's questions. As she began to run towards the car, Stern shut the door and was driven away, unaware that he had been seen.

At first Dorothy had tried to refuse but Stern persuaded her. Pleading with her that he needed her help, that she

was the only one who could help him. She had tried to get out of it but finally she had to admit that there was no-one else. Sitting on the edge of Stern's bed, she shook her head.

'So there I was, thinking all I was getting was the best gammon steak in England. And now this.'

'Stick with me kid and you'll see the sights,' said Stern, taking her hand and kissing her fingers. She looked down at him as he spoke and she wasn't sure if she had heard him correctly.

'What did you say?'

'Catcher or beater?' he said, hissing through her fingers. 'Since you're not just anyone, someone special, as it were, you get the choice. The advantage of being beater is that you're not in at the death. But it means you have to go down the pipe.'

Dorothy thought for a moment. 'Catcher,' she said.

'Okay, catcher, let's go.'

Stern walked across to the cupboard, reached downwards and pulled out a sack. He winked at Dorothy, heaved it over his shoulder and led her downstairs. It took her ten minutes to drive to the canal and another five minutes to find the manhole cover. Stern checked with his notes, walked back the hundred yards to the canal and scrambled down the bank to the water's edge. A sewer pipe projected outwards and down three feet from the bank. Stern leant against it, testing it for strength. He pushed hard on the end but it didn't move. Dorothy watched as he collected three large stones and pulled a heavy net from his bag. 'From the Scouts,' he said. 'They use it for catching Girl Guides or something.' But Dorothy didn't laugh.

He threaded a rope through the net, dropped the stones inside and began to feed one end of the net over the pipe, pulled the rope tight. The net lay limply against the bank,

hanging from the end of the pipe. Stern looked at it with satisfaction.

'Okay,' he said. 'It should be simple enough. The rats come rushing down the tunnel and drop into the bag. Once you've got two or three, just whip it off, pull the rope tight so that the net closes and bung the whole lot into the canal. The stones will sink it. But don't forget to hold on to the rope. And for Christ's sake don't get bitten.'

'Roger,' said Dorothy.

'Right, I'm off. You'll be hearing from me.'

Stern picked up the bag, climbed up the slope and stumbled across the field to the manhole cover. He pulled it open, fished out a torch and the packet of fireworks from the Chinese restaurant, counted to ten and began to climb down the ladder into the tunnel. At first he could see nothing but slowly he began to make out the contours of the pipe and he was grateful that he could stand almost to his full height. He hadn't been too keen on the thought of crawling after the rats on his hands and knees.

Slowly he moved forward, flashing his torch. He thought he heard scrabbling noises and stopped, swallowing nervously. A tin can rolled towards him and he sprang backwards feeling the damp of the wall against his back. He cursed aloud and the sound of his voice frightened him.

He kept his torch pointed to the floor of the tunnel, playing the beam into the water. Nothing came past him. If there were any rats in that part of the tunnel they were ahead of him. Stern began to move faster, becoming more confident, wiggling his toes in his boots, whispering 'mush, mush', as he moved towards the dim light where Dorothy was waiting with the net.

He stopped at a point he thought must be about twenty yards from the canal and selected a firework from the packet. Quickly he snapped on his lighter, lit the fuse and tossed it ahead of him. The explosion astounded him, caus-

ing him to stagger backwards, flapping uselessly at his ears with his free hand. He had had no idea that it would be so loud. Something scrambled past him and he screamed, waving his torch and catching sight of a tail as the animal ran up the tunnel.

'Wrong way, you bastard,' he shrieked. 'Come back you little sod.'

He turned and threw another banger, then another. He was a little crazy now, running behind the explosions, throwing fireworks as if they were grenades, feeling like Audie Murphy slaughtering the Japs, until at the end of the tunnel he ran slap into a bricked-up wall. He blinked and looked down. The pipe was sloping down towards the canal. He didn't know how far away he was as he stood panting, breathless. He lobbed another banger down the pipe and thought he could hear a squeal. He shouted for Dorothy; a long hull-oooo. He listened. Faintly he could hear a voice.

'They won't come out. They're hanging about at the end of the pipe.'

Stern cursed and groped inside the packet. 'This'll fix them,' he said lighting a giant crackerjack. He spun it down the pipe and heard it explode : crack, crack and again. He could see the spark as the cracker leapt around the pipe. He lit another and threw it down. And another and then the last of the collection.

Finally there was silence. He shouted but he could hear nothing. His ears had gone dull with the noise. There was nothing left for him to do and so he ran back along the tunnel, stumbling and slipping until he reached the ladder.

Dorothy was sitting by the canal holding onto the rope which led into the water and disappeared.

'There's no need to yell,' she said as Stern asked what she had got.

'What?' shouted Stern.

Dorothy held up three fingers and pointed to the water. Stern grinned and rubbed his hands together. 'Alright, haul them out,' he said.

She pulled on the rope and the net emerged from the canal. She dragged it to the bank and stared at it. 'Oh for the love of God,' she said, shuddering. 'They're still moving.' Stern looked around him, pulled a rock from the bank, raised it above his head, shut his eyes and hurled it into the mass of twitching fur.

'Oh Jesus.' Dorothy groaned turning her head away.

Stern slumped to the ground, reached into the bag and pulled out a brandy bottle, one third full.

Dorothy grabbed for it, drank deeply and coughed. 'I think we should go now,' she said quietly.

Stern spread the garbage bag on the ground, held it open and gestured to her to tip the rats inside. She shut her eyes, picked up the net and threw it in; rats, net, stones and weed from the canal.

They drove in silence towards the farm, Stern's arm round her shoulders, caressing the nape of her neck. When they were forced to stop at a junction, she leant across and kissed him gently on the lips.

'I love you,' he said. It was the first time he had ever uttered the phrase.

The farmer shook his hand solemnly and led him to the barn nearest the house. Behind the door, hung two foxes, shot neatly through the head. Stern thanked him, dropped them into the boot beside the garbage bag and, as Dorothy revved the engine, he realised that there was nowhere he could leave the animals and that he was going to have to sleep with them in the same room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Diggery's secretary had come to the conclusion over the past couple of days that sympathy was a finite virtue. Those colleagues of her boss who had offered him their condolences and who had said they would do anything for him were now beginning to fray at the edges. At first, when he had put in the long hours and had begun to catch up, they had all agreed that he was fighting his grief with the most powerful weapon in his armoury; his dedication to his career would see him over the worst times.

But recently there had been mistakes and Sally was getting worried. He had missed three meetings and the apologies were quite obviously fabricated. It was so unlike him. Had an outsider asked Sally to prove that there was something wrong, she would have found it difficult. What, after all, do a few unattended meetings, the odd mistake, the occasional flash of temper amount to when a man has just lost his daughter in the most appalling circumstances? Nothing, nothing at all.

But Sally knew Lambert Diggery as a man who never made mistakes. He had never missed a meeting and had never shown signs of temper. If she had been asked to guess how he would react in times of stress, she would have expected him to become even more compassionate and, if it were possible, even more meticulous.

And such was his position in the Department that no-one could or would do anything. His friends weren't sure how to broach the subject to him. One colleague had asked in frustration how on earth did one discuss frailty with a paragon of all the virtues? There was standard procedure which could be brought into effect when someone went off

the rails but no-one could remember any relevant precedents. Perhaps the Minister would have to be involved. No-one was quite sure. A lot of dust needed to be blown off the rule book in order to find out what to do.

And so they all hoped that this would be a temporary aberration which in a few weeks would either be forgotten or, at worst, treated as an understandable and forgiveable lapse.

'Your wife,' said Sally, holding the receiver in her hand and looking questioningly at Diggery. As often as not in the past he would be out to his wife. It wasn't that he didn't care for her a great deal. Sally knew that they had a good marriage. It was just that sometimes she would go on about trivialities and disturb his train of thought.

He said nothing this time but Sally could see the irritation in his eyes as he picked up his extension. He listened without saying a word, grunted that he'd be right there, dropped the receiver on the hook, stood up, walked to the closet, took out his coat and left the room. Sally jumped to her feet and ran after him. He was half way down the corridor when she called his name. The meeting? She was pleading, what about the meeting with the Foreign Sec's PPS? But he had gone. She ran after him but already he was in the lift and the doors were closing. Sally shook her head in bewilderment. This, she thought to herself, just couldn't continue.

Joan was in tears when he got home. It was that man again, she said through her sobs, that Stern or whatever his name is, standing there and staring up the drive. And then, she said, she was talking to the butcher who told her that the farmer's wife had been in and was saying that Stern had been asking her husband to shoot foxes.

'Lambert, you *must* go to the police.' She was staring at him, pleading, and again he tried to calm her. Gently he soothed her, stroked her hair and said that they'd simply

have to weather the storm; it was no good trying to put pressure on these people.

But Joan shook her head. She walked to the fireplace holding her hands to her face, stopped and swayed, eyes tightly shut, her head whipping from side to side, saying; 'No, no, no, please no.' Violently and unexpectedly she screamed and Diggery, shocked, lashed out at her, aiming to slap her face but missing as she reeled backwards, catching her instead with his elbow on her cheek as she staggered forward again off the wall.

For a moment they stood gaping at each other, stunned by the sudden violence. Joan tenderly touched her cheek then ducked away from her husband and ran upstairs. Diggery followed her into the hallway, stepped onto the staircase, then changed his mind and left the house by the back door, slamming it shut and half-running up the garden path and over the stile into the wood.

He walked until his legs began to ache, moving quickly through the trees, taking deep breaths and trying to clear the confusion from his brain. One thing was certain. Joan couldn't go on like this. If she didn't show some sign of improvement soon he would have to call in the doctor. She could take no more sedation, he was sure of that. He would call the doctor tomorrow, first thing. That decided, he felt better and turned towards home. He had walked almost to the meadow and on the way back he decided to cut through the access lane.

The wind had come up and he shivered, staring into the gloom and wishing for summer and the long bright evenings.

He was walking quickly, whistling a nondescript little tune when he saw the Alsatian blocking his path and he stopped. He looked behind him and turned back to stare at the dog. It had caught sight of him and was walking slowly towards him. If he turned and ran he would get no more than a few yards. He would have to walk past it. The dog

sat down in the middle of the lane staring at him, its ears pricked forward, tongue lolling out of its mouth. Diggery began to move slowly forward trying to remember what he had read. Did they become angry if you stared them in the face or what? Could he sidle past it, pretending to ignore the beast? Wasn't there something about them being able to detect fear? It was the smell, wasn't it? When people were frightened they exuded an odour, didn't they? Diggery wondered if he was exuding an odour. . . . He stepped forward shakily, feeling the perspiration forming on his upper lip. The dog stood up again as he came near, staring at him, its tail held low, mouth open, its head bobbing slightly as it sniffed the air.

As Diggery drew level, the dog dropped into a crouch, its forelegs splayed on the ground, head down, staring up at him and panting. Diggery backed into the hedge. He tried to say something: down boy, something like that, but the words wouldn't come. He crab-walked sideways along the hedge, feeling the twigs spiking into his neck and the dog turned to watch him. He walked backwards all the way up the lane and as he reached the road, the dog sat down. Diggery turned and sprinted, not stopping until he had reached his front door. As he fumbled with the key he turned and glanced over his shoulder, half expecting the beast to be upon him springing for his throat. But there was nothing.

It took him ten minutes to get his breath back and an hour to get to sleep. And as he dozed he dreamt terrible dreams . . .

Stern caught the early train to Weybridge. He had phoned to check if Sax was to be at work that day but he didn't attempt to speak to him. He didn't want to give him the opportunity of turning him down; it was easier to refuse someone on the phone than on a doorstep. And so he

caught the early train, with the commuters. The others in the compartment ignored the bag and the smell coming from it. They read their papers, deep in concentration and Stern envied them their apparent unconcern. Again he hadn't slept. The dreams were getting worse. He had covered the wound on his wrist with a piece of sticking plaster but the sight of it only served to remind him of the two small scabs underneath and the possibility of the lurking virus – he pushed the thought from his mind and stared out of the window.

The receptionist did not even glance at the bag. She merely took his name and asked him to wait, returning to her work as if people came in every day with mouldering, festering corpses; then again, thought Stern, perhaps they do. Sax appeared almost immediately, motioning Stern to follow him.

'So,' he said when they were in his office, the bag taking up almost all of the floor space. 'You went and hypothetically did it, I see.'

Stern nodded looking at Sax as he leant against his workbench, arms folded, blinking down at the corpses. Stern was unsure of the best way to approach him. He decided to be humble.

'I'd be very grateful. I don't need to say how important . . .'

'Go away Mr. Stern,' said Sax abruptly. 'I don't want to know where you got these things. And I don't want to know you.'

Stern stared at him dumbly.

'But leave the booty behind. And give me a number where I can reach you tomorrow.'

Diggery was an hour late at the office and Sally was forced to cover for him. He lied to the Foreign Office about missing his appointment the day before and Sally noticed that the

deception came easily to him, as if he were becoming practised at it. She wanted to ask him what was wrong and to help him; but theirs wasn't that sort of relationship. There had been no need for emotion in their day-to-day routine; the job had always been conducted on a friendly but business-like level and now that she wanted to help, she couldn't break the habit.

He took an exceptionally long lunch and it was Sally who took the call from Joan. When she had transcribed her shorthand she left a note for Diggery; perhaps he could make some sense of it and, besides, it was none of her business.

Diggery arrived back at three-thirty and glanced through the messages on his desk. He frowned.

'Samples,' he said. 'What kind of samples?'

'I believe she said rats,' said Sally.

'And who told her about these rats?'

Sally glanced at her pad. 'A Mrs. Wilson, I understand. A neighbour of yours. She apparently heard some gossip in the village.'

Diggery grunted an obscenity under his breath and Sally blushed. He asked her to get him a phone number, changed his mind and dialled it himself. By the time he got through he had apparently rid himself of his temper and was smiling as he spoke to the switchboard.

Ron Franklin's secretary shouted across to her boss that someone called Diggery was on the line. Franklin frowned, shook his head and said he would take the call. This, he thought, should be interesting.

He listened for a moment, grunted and said he would be delighted to have a drink. He scribbled the name of a pub in the Strand and said he would be there. Seven o'clock would be fine.

He was ten minutes late and the barman pointed out Diggery sitting in a booth half way up the bar. Diggery

stood up as he approached and shook his hand, thanking him for coming at such short notice.

'Not at all. I'm intrigued,' said Franklin, settling himself. 'But, if I may ask, why this place?'

Diggery smiled. 'At the risk of sounding like James Bond,' he said, 'I'd rather not go to the club. Here no one would notice us together. Neither my colleagues nor yours.'

'I'm further intrigued,' said Franklin.

For a few minutes they indulged in small talk. Diggery asked about the latest political story and Franklin told him some gossip. And it was Franklin who decided to make the first move.

'I was very sorry to hear about your bereavement,' he said.

Diggery looked up from his glass. 'Were you?' he said. There was a pause before Diggery continued. 'I understand you are Andrew Stern's immediate boss?'

'Yes. Our switchboard would have told you that.'

Quietly he murmured. 'Mr. Franklin, do you know what rabieophobia is?' He looked up quickly catching the expression on the other man's face. Franklin shrugged.

'It is the fear of rabies,' he continued, a small smile on his face. 'And in some quarters it is thought of as being as dangerous as the disease itself.'

'Like crying wolf, you mean,' said Franklin.

'Something like that.' Diggery ignored Franklin's modest attempt at humour. 'People spend their lives looking for symptoms in their dogs and cats. They throw their pets out into the streets, and if governments catch the disease, they tend to over-react, shooting and poisoning thousands of perfectly healthy animals. It is known, I believe, as a counter-productive anxiety situation. And I think it is something we should avoid.'

Franklin was silent.

'Did you know, Mr. Franklin, that there has been only

one death in France since 1924 despite the spread of rabies from the north and the east? Only one human fatality. And no panic. Did you know that in New York where there are literally thousands of dogs living in apartment blocks, there hasn't been a case in over twenty years? Hmm?' Diggery's voice had risen to a shrill monotone. He was staring hard at Franklin, talking fast. 'Did you also realise that forty to fifty percent of those bitten by a rabid animal fail to contract the disease?'

'I didn't know that,' said Franklin quietly.

Diggery pointed a finger at him. 'You said a moment ago that you felt sorry about my daughter's death.' Franklin opened his mouth to speak but Diggery shouted at him. 'I don't believe you. If you were really sorry you would leave us alone. You wouldn't send that fool to pester us.'

'If you mean Andrew Stern . . .'

'Of course I mean Stern. Andrew bloody Stern, coming round scaring the wits out of my wife . . .'

'Look, Mr. Diggery, I don't know where you get the impression . . .' Franklin was shouting now, trying to get a word in.

'I just want it stopped. Is that clear? I waited a long time on the assumption that you would call him off but the whole thing is beginning to affect the health of myself and my wife. Let me repeat myself. There is no rabies in this country. There never was any damned terrier and I'm asking you as politely as I am able, to leave us alone.'

Abruptly Diggery stood, turned and strode out of the bar. Franklin watched him go and finished his drink. He caught a cab back to the office and called Stern's hotel but there was no reply from his room.

He tried the number at hourly intervals all evening and well into the night but he couldn't make contact. Stern had gone back to Dorothy's house where, despite her comforting presence, he was unable to relax, thinking of the little man

in Weybridge peering into the dead brains of three rats and two foxes.

As Stern turned over and sought comfort from Dorothy, a young farmer, one hundred and fifty miles to the north-west, with a similar problem, attempted a more solitary solution to his insomnia. He led his horse from its stable, mounted it and cantered out of the yard. It was a therapeutic exercise, riding gently through the night, surveying his land, taking a quiet pride in all the work he had put into it. Perhaps, if he had not been riding bareback, he wouldn't have fallen when the horse reared; but it was so unexpected, the animal being normally so staid and solid; he would have bet against its blinking an eye if a bomb had gone off underneath it. But that night something frightened it. The horse rose high, thrashing its front legs and twisting its head, throwing the farmer heavily so that he lay on his back, twitching.

When he was found the next morning, the doctors at the hospital put his ravings down to exposure and concussion and they treated the cuts on his face as the normal abrasions suffered in a bad fall. They convinced his wife that all his ramblings about mad dogs were a result of concussion and they explained, in layman's terms, the nature of hallucination.

They were so persuasive, that when he was finally discharged, the farmer himself had come to believe that he had imagined the whole thing.

The next morning, a Saturday, the town was busy with weekend shoppers. Stern and Dorothy walked hand in hand through the meadow, saying little. He felt drained from another night of broken dreams. Twice he had sat up in bed shouting out a warning to someone or something, but he couldn't remember what it had been. And each time she

had had to calm him. Stern glanced at her as she walked beside him: no more wise-cracking, or sharp dialogue. He wondered why she bothered. She no longer had anything to gain by sticking with him; no gammon steaks or healthy, uninhibited sex. In her position he would have taken a walk long ago. But she was still there and he was glad of it.

In the meadow the spring sunshine had brought out the families. Boys were playing football and young parents were teaching their children to walk. And everywhere there were dogs of all shapes and sizes, sniffing and leaping, scurrying and snapping, chasing after sticks and rubber balls. Stern was reminded of a job he had done on the west coast of Africa where he had seen dogs shot on the beach each morning; and in Spain, two years ago on holiday, watching children throw rocks at puppies and cats, encouraged by their parents. And he wondered what it would be like in this meadow next year when the country was in fear of the virus and the animals that carried it.

At midday they walked back to Dorothy's car and drove to the hotel. Stern was dry-mouthed with anticipation and he had to clear his throat before asking at the desk if there were any messages.

'A Mr. Franklin was trying to reach you last night, sir,' said the receptionist. 'He asked you to call him at home this morning.'

'And that's all?'

'Yes sir.'

Stern left Dorothy in the bar and phoned Franklin from the lobby. There was no reply. He rejoined her and hoisted himself onto a stool.

'Do you want some lunch?' he asked. Dorothy shook her head. They sat sipping scotch for half an hour waiting for the news before Stern led her by the hand to his room. They were lying on the top of the bed dozing when the phone rang. Stern snatched at it and grunted into the

receiver, listened for a moment, said he was very grateful, and lay back.

'Negative,' he said softly. 'Every one of them; all fit as fiddles.' He turned quickly onto his stomach and his body began to heave in great gasping sobs and Dorothy was not sure at first whether he was laughing or crying. She touched him on the shoulder. 'So it's all right then?'

He spun round to face her, and she saw that he had been laughing. 'Sure it's all right. Everything's fine. So long as I'm wrong, everything is just fine.'

'Stop scratching your wrist then,' she said. He grabbed at her and they rolled over and over on the mattress. Again the phone rang.

'Yes?'

'Have you gone native or something?'

'Oh Christ. Sorry Ron. I was out. I phoned you back but . . .'

'Your friend Diggery and I had a sociable drink last night.'

'Bully for you,' said Stern.

'Listen. Did Emma mention the breed of dog? The one that went missing?'

'Oh that old thing,' said Stern jocularly. 'A Great Dane I shouldn't wonder. But didn't you know there was no dog? Little Miss Diggery was bitten by a cat in France. End of story.'

'Andy, please shut up.' Franklin was becoming annoyed. 'Last night Diggery warned us off the story and he let slip that the dog was a terrier.'

Briefly Stern was silent, frowning into the receiver; and then he smiled. 'So what, Sherlock,' he said. 'A phantom terrier with a phantom name. Etienne the ghost dog, remember?'

'Perhaps. But I am beginning to wonder about this one.

Tell me, did you check back on Diggery's itinerary when he was on holiday?'

'Of course. I tried to find out where they stayed on their last night on the Continent. But there was no fixed route. They were simply travelling as the mood took them. I'm sure that his secretary knows where they stayed because she would have had to have a contact number for him in case he was recalled.'

'And you tried her?'

'Sure. But she's as loyal as a cocker spaniel. Showed me the door.'

'A pity,' said Franklin. 'A great pity . . .'

Stern interrupted. 'What do you want Ron? I've just had a whole bunch of animals tested for rabies down here and they're all clean. And there's not enough to confront Diggery.'

'I agree. So you should go for the wife; a touch of the nasty old-fashioned stuff. Doorstep her, keep the pressure on. I believe the emotive word for it is hounding.'

'He'll put the law on me.'

'I don't think so,' said Franklin. 'He would have done that already if he had wanted to. My guess, for what it's worth, is that he's worried about our original story, the whore, remember, and whatever dirty business she landed him in; and he's using rabies as an excuse to get me to call you in.'

Stern shook his head. 'I don't see it.'

'You don't have to. If it makes it any easier, I'm telling you to get on with it – my way.' There was a pause and Stern could hear him chuckle. 'We've got to do something anyway to justify your fucking hotel bill.'

Stern agreed, said goodbye and hung up.

'Would you believe it?' he said, staring at the ceiling. 'I'd just about convinced myself that maybe I could be wrong and maybe this bloody bite was no more than it looks. And

Franklin has to come along and say he thinks I've got something.'

'Rabies you mean?' Dorothy looked puzzled.

Stern laughed. 'Something like that.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There were times during the next two weeks when Andrew Stern thought he was losing the battle against the panic that always threatened to take him over. During the day, he remained in control of himself most of the time. He had his work to do and a routine that never altered. And he had his books : science fiction, detective stories, thrillers. He kept them in a satchel and read them as he waited outside 'The Gables'. But he couldn't get through the nights. The mild sedatives from the chemist allowed him some kind of half-sleep until around four o'clock when he awoke in a sweat, his eyes bulging, fighting away the recurring nightmare of a bullet-shaped coffin. Towards the end of the first week he awoke with a dry throat, unable to swallow, his eyes watering, and in a panic he rushed to the doctor's surgery, waiting in the rain for it to open, clenching and unclenching his fists, oblivious to the stares of the people going to work, as he shivered in the doorway, talking to himself, pleading aloud that he would be alright.

The doctor told him that it was only a head cold and became irritated when Stern pressed him. Of course he was certain it was a cold, the doctor said angrily, and if everyone came running to him with a runny nose he would never get his work done.

Stern sat at 'The Gables' that day, sniffing and waving a tissue at the window of the house whenever he thought he caught a glimpse of Joan.

She had learnt not to open the door at nine-fifteen when Stern knocked. At first she had slammed it in his face but now she simply waited for him to go away and resume his vigil at the gate. Whenever she looked through the window

she saw him standing there. Sometimes he looked up and waved at her so that she had to retreat behind the curtains. When he wasn't at the gate she had learnt to take the phone off the hook; he would be down at the call box dialling her number and she wasn't going to give him the pleasure of hearing her hang up on him, or let him hear the catch in her voice as she told him please to leave her alone.

There were times when she thought she had beaten him and she could think of something other than the sight of his sitting by her gate. Occasionally she defeated him by escaping into her books or when there was something interesting on the radio. But always he was there. When it rained he sat under a golf umbrella and wore an anorak; when the sun shone, he stretched out on the verge lying on his stomach reading.

When she drove into town she would close her eyes as she passed him, then see him in her driving mirror gesturing for his driver. She would lose him of course but as often as not he would find her again in town and come up to her as she was leaving the shops and she would have to move away fast as he shouted after her, always the same thing: 'I have to talk to you. It's important.'

Twice in desperation she picked up the phone and dialled the police station but each time, as a voice answered, she hung up. She knew she wouldn't have been able to face her husband's derision when he found out. When he came home at night she didn't mention Stern to him. There was no point. Stern always left before Diggery came home. Sometimes she wished that he would stay, so that Lambert could see him, but always, at six o'clock he waved to her and turned away from the gate.

Once she tried to tell him, but he wasn't listening. They scarcely communicated these days. He ate in silence and came to bed late. On two occasions in the night during the

two weeks of Stern's vigil, Diggery awoke and clutched at his wife. She didn't fight him and, when it was over, they turned away from each other in silence.

On the Friday evening Gillian Keightley prepared a dinner of rump steak and mushrooms for herself. It was a simple routine procedure: steak every Friday with a morsel saved for the dog as a treat. When she finished that evening, she cleared away the dishes and settled into her rocking chair. She picked up her knitting, stretched towards the coffee table and switched on her cassette tape recorder. The voice from the machine was well-modulated, trained at RADA; the tape was 'David Copperfield'. Miss Keightley nodded her head in agreement as young David was lectured on the ways of the world. She mouthed the words along with the speaker, smiling to herself contentedly. Every five minutes or so she reached across to the table and picked out a chocolate from the box her niece had sent her.

When the dog growled, she frowned and sat up in her seat reaching out towards the sound, making clucking noises with her tongue. The growling grew deeper and she called the dog to her.

She was aware of its moving, heaving the great bulk of its body from the floor and padding towards her. It stopped at her feet and coughed. The woman stood up, snapped off the tape recorder and bent towards the dog. It had gone. She turned, listening.

'Goldie?'

From the far corner of the room she heard a whining sound and turned to face it. 'Come on, come on,' she coaxed. 'What's wrong with you?' Quickly the dog made a rush at her, almost knocking her over as its head bumped against her hip. She bent down and put her arm round its shoulders and stared sightlessly into its eyes, crooning noises at it. She felt the dog's nose and the moisture at its mouth.

'You're not well are you? We'll have to take you to the vet.'

She stroked the dog's head and went back to her chair. For half an hour she sat rocking gently, working at her knitting, then rose and walked to the kitchen, picked up a milk bottle and moved carefully back through the living room, side stepping the dog and out towards the front door. She shivered as she opened the door and bent to place the bottle in a small plastic holder. She was still bending when the dog hit her from behind and, as she tried to turn, it knocked her to the ground, butting its head against her legs, snapping silently at her face. For a moment the dog stood over her body and as she shouted, it ran for the gate. The blind woman lay where she was, screaming uncontrollably, her hands held trembling to her torn face.

Stern and Dorothy left the restaurant at eleven and walked slowly towards her car. It had been a pleasant meal, Dorothy doing most of the talking, telling him about her day, the little pieces of gossip and tittle-tattle which amused him. Stern had said little and he was beginning to understand the problems of the housewife and the assembly-line worker who did the same job day in, day out. As he said to her, when you sit all day outside someone's house, you haven't got a vast amount to talk about in the evenings.

She made no mention of dogs or foxes, even when she saw him rubbing his wrist at the spot where the wound had long since vanished. They had made a pact not to talk about it. Stern simply did his nine to six shift at 'The Gables' every day and came home to his girl.

They had drunk enough wine for Stern to make the mistake of sliding into the driving seat. Dorothy sat beside him waiting to see how long it would take him to remember. He had started the car and was about to put it in gear when he slapped himself on the forehead and swore. They made

quite a production out of crossing over, fumbling with each other, Stern's jeans catching on the handbrake.

Dorothy drove carefully down the High Street and turned towards Stern's hotel. He was singing quietly, his head resting on the seat, his knees up against the dashboard and it was Dorothy who first caught sight of the dog. 'Good Lord, how strange,' she said, slowing the car almost to a halt. They were in a quiet suburban street seemingly deserted except for the dog.

'How peculiar,' she said again, staring through the windscreen.

'What?' Stern yawned.

'That dog, across the road, the big labrador. It seems to be trying to eat the lamp-post.'

Stern sat up and looked out. The dog stood motionless now, looking over its shoulder at them as the car slowly cruised towards it. As they watched, it turned back again and shook its head, caught in a fit of sneezing. As they drew level the dog leapt at the lamp-post butting its head into the concrete, leaping backwards and snapping its jaws. Dorothy stopped the car and the dog glanced at them before sprinting forward up the road.

'Follow that dog,' shouted Stern and Dorothy giggled.

'Go on for God's sake.' And she realised he was serious.

The dog was fifty yards away and had slowed to a trot, staring ahead at someone who was walking quickly along the pavement. Stern could see it was a young girl, in her early teens perhaps, probably on her way home from the pictures, he thought; from the back she looked pretty, swinging her handbag and strolling, head erect, swaying slightly at the hips; the sort of girl you'd look twice at. He hunched forward in his seat, staring through the window. 'Oh Christ,' he said quietly as the dog gained on the girl. 'Quickly Dorothy, in the name of God.' But the dog had sprinted again and as Stern wound down his window to

shout a warning, it leapt, its weight dragging the girl to her knees. Over the noise of the engine Stern could hear her screams and the ripping of fabric as the dog's head rose and fell and the girl sprawled onto her back.

Dorothy spun the wheel, sending the car skidding across the road. The dog leapt backwards, shaking its muzzle and dropped again to the ground, holding something between its front paws and gnawing at it. The girl lay on her side, her arms wrapped round her head, her legs twitching.

Stern whispered: 'Christ, it's bitten her ear off,' as Dorothy braked and the dog looked round and sprinted again, fast up the middle of the road.

'Get after him,' yelled Stern but Dorothy had jumped from the car and was bending over the girl, turning back to look at Stern, her face twisted in horror.

Stern vaulted into the driving seat, brutally palmed the gear stick into first and dragged at the wheel, peering up the road in time to see the dog turn a corner, its back legs skidding on the grass verge. He followed it, crashing through the gears, spinning the old car into the avenue and stopped. The dog was attacking a pillar box, beating its head against it and snarling. Stern tightened his grip on the wheel, swallowed hard and drove at the dog, his body stiff, waiting for the impact. He could see the tail of the beast, held high and straight, just below the bonnet and he shut his eyes as he felt the collision, a hard sharp sound of grinding metal. The car stalled. Stern opened his eyes. There was no sound. It was strange. He thought he would have felt the shock of the dog's body, but nothing. Slowly he opened the driver's door and bent half out, swallowing again as he peered under the wheels. Nothing. He had missed it. He had missed the dog, glanced off the pillar box and stalled.

He sat up straight again and turned to look out of the back window, his right leg out of the door for balance. But nothing. There was no sign of the beast anywhere. Puzzled,

he turned back and gasped as he saw the face staring at him through the windscreen, the eyes glaring at him, the mouth open, streaked with spittle; and then the dog was gone; a leap, so that Stern caught a glimpse of underbelly and it was on the roof, its feet slipping and scraping as it struggled to get a grip. Stern snatched his leg back into the car leant across the passenger seat and frantically wound up the window. He could hear the growling now, punctuated by strange low-pitched coughing sounds. At first the car wouldn't start and he thought he was trapped but finally it wheezed into life. He pushed the gear into reverse and let the clutch out fast, the car bucking backwards. Above him he heard a scrabble of feet as the dog skidded forward. He was looking behind him over his shoulder and he didn't see the dog as it half-fell, half-jumped onto the bonnet and fought to keep its balance. When he turned he glimpsed the jaws again, snapping at him through the glass before the dog slithered sideways and fell from sight. Stern rammed the car into forward gear and jolted it forward, closing his eyes again, anticipating the nausea as the tyres would tear the life out of the animal. But again there was nothing and when he opened his eyes saw the dog moving fast down an alley.

Stern drove frantically along one avenue, down another, up a third, silently praying that he hadn't lost the dog when he saw it streak out from a hedge and dash in front of him. When it saw the car it stopped, on the pavement, staring at Stern unblinking before rearing up, spinning on its hind legs and taking off again, moving fast down the centre of the road. Stern whooped and followed it, crossing his fingers in the hope that it would stay in his sight. The avenue was long and straight with a ditch on the left and a scattering of trees boarding a field. If the dog turned that way, he would have to follow it on foot. On the right was a row of semi-detached houses set back behind thirty-foot lawns.

The dog ran straight for fifty yards then turned and fled into one of the gardens. It was a neat lawn, dotted with rose bushes. Without hesitation Stern turned in after it thankful there were no walls, only a small kerb running the length of the avenue. The car careered across the grass, tearing throught the bushes and the dog leapt a wire fence into the next garden. Stern shut his eyes as the bumper tore into the wire, snapping it like cotton and again he was after the dog, close behind it now, the wheels slewing on the damp lawn, over herbaceous borders, splashing through an ornamental pond and crushing a garden gnome, until the dog made another move, to its left and back into the road. Stern turned to follow it but lost control as the wheel struck the kerb and slid sideways, quite gently into a parked car, Stern's windscreen shattered and he felt his neck whipping back and then forward.

He sat motionless, winded, staring ahead. Slowly he searched his face for blood but there was none. He stared, puzzled, as the dog leapt onto the bonnet, snarling at him through the broken glass, blood dripping from its muzzle. Stern gazed stupidly at it for a moment before reaching again for the ignition. The dog's face was inches from him as he turned the key. But the engine was dead. Stern could feel the panic building up inside him but he couldn't move. The dog's face fascinated him, snarling, its feet scrabbling among the glass on the bonnet, trying to get a hold so that it could leap. Stern blinked as he heard the sound of running feet behind him. The dog looked up over the roof of the car and leapt from the bonnet as someone snatched open the door. It was a big man, looking in, shouting something. Slowly Stern swung himself out of the seat and stood on the pavement staring up the road. The man had hold of him by the lapels and Stern tried to push him off, but his grip tightened until Stern did something he'd only seen done on television. He butted the man full on the nose.

Stern stumbled as he turned away from the car to chase the dog. He was cursing loudly, roaring at the top of his voice for the dog to stop, coughing as he ran. He knew he was in no condition to keep this up for long. The dog ran through a garden, over a fence and down into a patch of rough ground. Stern followed, concentrating on the chase, not caring if the big man was following him, or if he had called the police; or if the whole of the county force was on his tail.

The waste ground led into a timber yard and he lost sight of the dog. He stumbled forward, hoping it hadn't backtracked on him. But it wouldn't. It would run onwards in a straight line. He felt sure of that. Didn't the book say so? In front of him he heard a rumbling sound and a yelp. He moved faster towards the sound. The dog was whining somewhere in front of and beneath him. Cautiously he moved forward, blinking, wishing the moon was out. He could hardly see a yard in front of him. Had he been running he would have fallen as the dog had. The ground sloped steeply away and at the foot, the dog sat, panting. Stern peered over the edge looking at it. The dog sniffed and looked up. When it saw Stern it opened its mouth as if to bark but it could only grunt a strange low pitched cough. To his right Stern saw a large boulder jutting from the edge of the slope. Slowly he moved towards it, stood behind it and kicked at it. At first, the rock didn't move. Stern bent and put his shoulder behind it and again almost falling as the rock began to move. As it pitched downwards, the dog staggered to its feet, holding one foreleg off the ground. It dragged itself painfully out of the path of the rock and began to hobble away. Stern slithered down the slope, squealing sharply as his ankle turned. He sat at the bottom gasping, took a deep breath and limped after the dog which was moving easier now, trotting three-legged through the yard and up onto the bank of the reservoir.

They ran together, one man and a dog, both limping, the dog stretching its lead until Stern began to lose sight of it and he cursed, the tears of pain smarting on his cheeks and the bile choking him until some way ahead he heard a sharp coughing sound and a slow whine, followed, two seconds later by a splash.

He staggered the last few yards and gazed down at the body of the dog in the water, drifting slowly away from him. He slid the three feet down the slope and paddled into the reservoir, gasping as the water rose to his thighs, grabbed the dog by the tail, pulling it back to the bank and dragged it up onto the grass.

As he was trying to read the dog's name embossed on its collar, the first policeman arrived.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Normally, late on a Saturday afternoon, there was only one reporter or desk-man on duty at Stern's office, his job being to take any messages from the correspondents and to check the agency tapes and to leave a memo for the news editor who came in early on the Sunday. It was a boring and lonely shift and the Saturday man was glad that day to see Ron Franklin walk in. They were joined by a couple of reporters who lived nearby and they sat in a group round a desk waiting for the phone to ring. Franklin had brought in a bottle of whisky and they sipped from plastic cups as the tape machine chattered behind them and the television showed a Rugby League game.

'When do we know?' asked one of the reporters.

'An hour, maybe two,' said Franklin. 'I've asked them to call us here as soon as they find out. We should know before the agencies.'

There was a noise on the stairs and the swing doors creaked open. Stern ambled in, yawning and Franklin smiled at him.

'They let you out then?'

Stern nodded. 'Kind of a remand thing. Unofficial. No bail or anything. Just till we see how it works out.' He looked tired, his face pale, a day's stubble on his chin.

'Have they charged you?' asked Franklin, handing him a cup of whisky.

Stern shook his head. 'Are we celebrating something?'

'Good question,' said Franklin.

One of the reporters brought out a pack of cards and they played unenthusiastically, stopping whenever the phone

rang and continuing only when the duty-man gave the thumbs-down.

At six-thirty the three reporters stretched and yawned. They were going across to the pub. Franklin and Stern shook their heads and promised to pass on the word when it came through. For another half hour the two men sat at the desk watching a quiz show on television. The whisky bottle was finished but neither of them was showing any signs of wear.

At seven, the phone rang and Franklin grabbed it, shaking his head as he took down a message from somebody's wife.

'It's a bit like High Noon,' he said as he hung up, but as Stern opened his mouth to reply, the phone rang again. This time Franklin looked at it for a moment before picking it up.

He listened intently, said 'I see,' twice and hung up.

'It's rabies,' he whispered, staring straight at Stern. 'Confirmed. One hundred percent.'

Stern sighed, closed his eyes and lay back in his seat. The three reporters had returned and Franklin nodded to them.

'Christ,' said one. 'The biggest story of the year and the bloody Sundays will get it all to themselves.'

Stern looked up, his eyes sharp, staring at the man who had spoken. 'I'd have hidden the fucking dog for a day if I'd had the chance,' he shouted, and Franklin had to calm him down.

'It's alright,' said the reporter sheepishly, 'I was only . . .'

'Yeh, well, don't' said Stern, sucking at his wrist and blinking.

Franklin decided it was time to take charge. 'Right,' he said. 'They'll want a piece from you for Monday, Andrew.'

Stern said nothing. He dragged himself from his chair and moved across to a typewriter.

'How do you want it Ron?' he asked. 'What's the line?

"How I Discovered Rabies" by Andrew Stern. Or "How I Caught Rabies." Which way do you want it?'

But Franklin was on the phone and ignored him.

It took Stern forty minutes to write his piece and in that time Franklin remained constantly on the end of the telephone trying to get Diggery. 'It's no good,' he said as Stern rose from the desk. 'I think he's left it off the hook.'

Stern shrugged and pulled on his jacket. 'I'm going back down there tonight. I've got to sort myself out with the law. But if that pin-striped prick gets away with it, I'll have his wife tomorrow. Make no mistake. Ron. I'll have her.'

Joan Diggery's voice gave the impression of being calm and controlled. She spoke softly, enunciating the words, staring at her husband's back.

'I suppose you think they're being ultra-suspicious. I mean the police *and* the office, both phoning you like that, asking silly questions.'

Diggery sighed and spoke quietly, as if to a child. 'Of course not darling. It's perfectly reasonable. After all, the coincidence is quite remarkable.'

'Quite remarkable,' she said mimicking him. 'Co-in-ci-dence; a quite re-mark-able co-in-ci-dence.' She spat the last word out, hissing the sibilants. As he turned to face her, she walked over and pointed at him, driving her finger into his breastbone. 'But you put them right, didn't you. You convinced them, you little silver-tongued devil.' The phone rang and Diggery moved away from his wife, glad of the distraction.

'Franklin? . . . Yes, I had heard. It's awful . . . A remarkable coincidence.' He glanced across at his wife. 'The Department is putting out a statement from me on the wires and I hope this will stop your Fleet Street colleagues from pestering me . . . one of them had the nerve to ask

me if Emma had ever bitten anyone.' Behind him he heard a sob and he watched expressionless as Joan collapsed onto the sofa covering her face with her hands.

'Mmmm . . . no there can be no connection. If you think about it, you will see . . . no, they have still never found that cat. It was a stray, could be dead, could be anywhere. . . . But with all these people smuggling their pets through the Kent ports, it was inevitable that one day . . .'

Diggery looked round as Joan fled from the room, holding a handkerchief to her mouth.

She wouldn't let him sleep that night. She nagged him, shook him by the shoulder and ignored his curt instructions to stop acting like a child. She swore at him and muttered abuse. All she didn't do was plead with him.

'You can't say now that there was no dog,' she repeated over and over. 'It was the dog that killed Emma, wasn't it . . .

'IT WAS THE DOG THAT KILLED EMMA!'

Diggery lay still until he could take it no longer. He jumped from the bed and ran stumbling from the room. Slowly he walked down the corridor to Emma's room, hesitated for a moment and went inside. He sat on her bed staring in the dark at her dresses in the cupboard and ran his hand over the crumpled sheet. He wept quietly, holding his hand to his eyes and didn't see Joan come in. When she spoke his name he looked up startled and held out his hand to her. She moved to the bed and held him in her arms, stroking his brow, telling him that it would be alright once he had cleared his conscience. They could go away and live in a small house somewhere. Soon it would all blow over. Diggery shook his head. She sounded, he thought, like some hooker in a Western telling Billy the Kid to give himself up. Gently he pushed her away from him and walked to the window.

He looked out, blinking back the tears, and in the dull

glow of a street light he saw a man standing at the end of the drive.

Stern arrived at Dorothy's house at eight o'clock, just ahead of the milkman and clutching the Sunday papers under his arm. She opened the door sleepily and hugged him, saying nothing until he was seated at the kitchen table sipping tea.

'Where have you been?' she said at last.

'Going a little crazy,' he said.

'Are you alright now.'

'It depends but I don't think so.' He was flipping through each of the papers, reading the main story quickly in each

'Do they mention you?' asked Dorothy. Stern said nothing.

'Did they say it was you who caught the dog?'

'Mmmm?'

Dorothy shrugged and pottered around, banging the frying pan and whistling. Finally Stern stood up and moved in behind her, folding his arms round her from the back, kissing the nape of her neck.

'He's got away with it,' he said. 'The bastard. He's convinced them all that there was no connection.'

'I thought he might.' She leant back into him, shaking her head and whimpering as he played with her body.

'They're treating it as a localised outbreak,' he said.

'Is that bad?'

'Yes.' He led her across to the table and sat her down on his knee.

'I called Boman last night. The dog is still missing. Then I spoke to Sax.'

Dorothy gazed at him, wondering where all this was leading.

'It's confirmed what I suspected. I still can't get the injections.' He reached for one of the papers. 'It says here

that the dog's owner and the young girl are being treated. And get this.' He spread his arms dramatically. 'Goldie was a guide dog. A bloody guide dog. Would you believe it? Its owner confirms that it was attacked. But she's blind, isn't she? She doesn't know whether it was Cocky or a fox or a bloody elephant.'

'So the trail dries up with Goldie?' said Dorothy.

'I'm afraid so.'

Without warning, Dorothy began to cry, holding Stern's hand and weeping openly and unashamedly, staring into his face, and now it was his turn to comfort her.

An hour later he picked up the *Sunday Times* and left the room leaving his girl to tidy the place up.

Joan Diggery struggled out from sleep at ten. On the pillow lay a note from her husband, saying he had gone for a drive to think things over. Drowsily she dragged herself from bed, pulled on her robe and made her way to the window. Shading her eyes from the light she peeped through the curtains. There was no-one at the end of the drive. Quickly she stumbled across the room, snatched the receiver off the hook and left it dangling by the bedside table.

She showered and dressed. A black suit and a veil. She made herself up and left the house. As she drove past the gates she looked around apprehensively but there was no-one to be seen. She drove slowly down the hill and stopped at the intersection into town. An unaccustomed blur of activity caused her to turn to her left. In the tennis courts a group of men in overalls and donkey jackets were digging holes in the clay. Already they had sunk a dozen posts into the ground and were busy hammering at others. Joan frowned. What on earth . . .? she thought. The season would be starting soon and no-one could play if . . . and then she saw the pile of muzzles in a corner of the court, a heap of wire and leather straps, and for the first time she

noticed the posters on the trees, the lurid red and green letters over the white skull :

RABIES
IS A KILLER.

She shuddered as she drove away and had to fight to keep the tears from clouding her eyes.

She didn't see Stern as she drew up to the church gate. He was standing a few yards away reading his paper and she didn't hear him speak her name. She walked across to the flower seller and Stern moved in behind her.

'Mrs. Diggery, I must speak . . .'

She jumped with shock, literally jerking her body so that the forget-me-nots scattered onto the gravel. But she didn't look round; she bent and gathered the bouquet together, then turned away and walked deliberately into the churchyard and along the path to the cemetery. Stern watched her and waited until she had reached Emma's grave. Slowly he folded his newspaper and walked towards her. As he reached the graveside, she was scattering the flowers on the earth. He approached her quietly from behind.

'You've seen this have you?' thrusting the paper in front of her face. She didn't flinch but stood head bowed, staring downwards.

'The authorities are treating it as a localised outbreak,' he said. 'Can you read that? Right there on the front page. Look.' He reached round her shoulder to point at the headline. 'See, a localised outbreak. Do you know what that means?'

Stern paused but she didn't move.

'It means that they will treat an area with a twelve mile radius from here. It means that all the stray dogs and cats will be rounded up. Even now they are laying poison for the foxes. It means that the movement of livestock will be restricted and there won't be any more gymkhanas for a while.'

Again he paused. 'And you know what, Mrs. Diggery? It's all a complete waste of time because they are assuming that the disease has been in the country for a couple of weeks.'

Joan stiffened but didn't turn round and Stern tapped the paper. 'But we know that it's been here since January. Don't we? Ever since Emma brought back that little terrier called Etienne.'

Joan spun round, sweeping back her veil and Stern tried to hide the shock in his face as he stared into the sunken eyes wet with tears, the hollow cheeks streaked with mascara. Joan's mouth opened to speak but no words came. She closed her eyes and lashed out at him, pushing him so violently that he staggered back and she began to run, away from the church, deeper into the cemetery, wobbling on her heels.

Stern shouted after her. 'You know they call it the escape disease don't you?' He ignored the stares of the other mourners as they looked at him from the gravesides. 'The animal runs and runs, Mrs. Diggery, trying to escape the virus. A fox can run twelve miles a day, Mrs. Diggery. Did you know that?'

She had stopped now, leaning against a tree and Stern walked up to her still shouting. 'Multiply the number of days since you came back from France by twelve and see how far it could have spread . . .'

He stood a yard or so behind her and he could see the sobs shaking her shoulders as she slumped against the tree. 'There's plenty more space in here. Take a look. Room for plenty more eleven-year-olds. Soon you won't be quite so lonely down here, Mrs. Diggery.'

He moved up to her shoulder and spoke softly.

'I'll be in my room at the hotel early tomorrow morning. The Sugar Loaf, room seven. You can come in and get it over with. Then you can go away.'

Her bag lay open at her feet. Stern reached into his pocket, bent forward and dropped something inside. 'I forgot to return this,' he said.

Joan looked down and saw the photograph of Emma, the one she had given Billy the day her daughter had vanished.

Stern spoke softly: 'I won't be standing outside your house tonight, Mrs. Diggery.'

He turned and walked away. One of the mourners, a large burly man tried to block his path, asking him in a loud voice what in God's name he thought he was up to. But Stern side-stepped him, reached the gate and wandered slowly up the hill, back towards Dorothy's flat.

Joan lay awake that night staring at the ceiling. She could hear the barking of the strays, already tied up in the tennis courts and she tried to count the different sounds, attempting to find out how many there were; the whining and the howling interrupted only by the staccato tap of her husband's typewriter as he worked downstairs in his study.

She slipped out of bed and went to Emma's room. For a moment she stood hesitantly at the door glancing at the bed and the dresser. And then she took a deep breath and walked purposefully inside. She picked up the tissue and threw it into the waste basket, replaced the brush and comb on the dresser, pulling a few hairs from the brush and dropping them onto the carpet. She dragged the sheets and pillowcases from the bed, threw them into a corner, bent to lift a small vacuum cleaner from the cupboard floor, plugged it in and began to work.

Downstairs the typewriter was silenced and, a moment later, Diggery stood in the doorway.

'What are you doing?' His voice was weary and impatient.

Joan kicked at the switch and as the sound died away

she looked up and asked quietly: 'Lambert, are you going to tell them about the dog?'

'Oh Joan, please.' He held out his arms to her. 'No more, please.'

She turned abruptly, snapped the cleaner back on and bent to her work. Diggery watched her as she cleaned around the bed then went back to his study.

Stern waited silently in his room with the man from the news agency he had hired as a witness. They had made a token attempt at conversation but the agency man could see that Stern was too nervous. Every so often he would go over to the window and look down into the street.

At nine o'clock they were standing together at the window and it was the agency man who spotted her first.

'Here she comes,' he said quietly.

She walked in without knocking and gazed round the room. Stern nodded to her and introduced the witness.

Joan shrugged. 'Alright then. How do we do this?'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Stern called, Dorothy rushed round to the hotel to collect him. He was quiet as she drove him to the station.

Dorothy gazed around as she drove. 'There's not much difference is there? I mean, it all looks the same.'

In reply Stern pointed to a side street where two men wearing Council overalls were chasing a black mongrel. One of them had a long stick with a net attached. The other carried what looked like a small pistol.

Dorothy stopped the car. 'They're not going to shoot it?' she said, her face aghast.

Stern shook his head. 'Syringe,' he said. 'To knock it out.'

The dog kept dodging them, its tail wagging, occasionally dropping into a crouch, its jaw on the pavement, looking up at them and grinning, then ducking away and running in semi-circles, the men falling over themselves trying to get near it.

'It would be funny wouldn't it, if it wasn't so damned horrific,' said Stern.

Dorothy didn't answer.

'I said it would be funny . . .' Stern exaggerated his speech. 'You going deaf or what?'

'No,' Dorothy sniffed. 'Just catching a cold I think.'

They kissed at the barrier and Dorothy wished him luck. He said he would phone and let her know how it went.

Franklin read the confession slowly, as Stern sat opposite. Occasionally he asked a question and Stern answered easily. He knew there were no problems. It was black and white, cut and dried, with no complications; on tape and witnessed. Franklin leant back in his chair and smiled.

'You said you'd get her, didn't you?'

'A man's gotta do what he says he's gotta do,' Stern was smiling but still there was a tension about him. Franklin knew him of old and there was something not quite right. The confidence was there but not the relaxation which normally accompanied the completion of a difficult job. He tried to draw him out, suggesting that the Journalist of the Year award was in the bag, but Stern didn't react, and eventually he had to ask him directly what was wrong.

'What's biting me, you mean?' But he wasn't smiling. Instead he bent down to his briefcase and picked out a book. He opened it at a marker and looked up at Franklin. 'I thought I'd be alright. I can probably get the injections now. No problem there. The only trouble is that you're supposed to be treated immediately after the bite.'

'Which means what?' asked Franklin.

'It means that I have to wait two years before I know I'm clear.'

Franklin whistled. 'If I were you my son, I'd go and get good and drunk.'

'Don't worry,' said Stern getting to his feet. 'Consider it done.'

The responsibility of informing the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was taken by the Editor himself. The Minister was in the House that evening and the Editor arranged to meet him at short notice to warn him of the most urgent matter. He took along a proof copy of Stern's story and presented it to him in his office. The Minister blanched as he read Joan Diggery's confession, looked up and thanked the Editor for bringing the incident to the public's attention.

'I only hope it will not start a panic,' he said.

'That, I suppose, is up to you and the P.M.,' replied the Editor.

'Quite,' said the Minister.

By the time the Editor's car had taken him the mile and a half back to his office, his rivals were already aware that something big was in the air. He had ordered a print run of an extra half a million copies and word of this had spread from the machine room to the pubs and into the executive offices of every paper on Fleet Street. Staff men at home and abroad were instructed to think fast and work out what was happening. They were worried. Could this be another Martin Bormann story? Or another Ronald Biggs? Throughout the Street there was apprehension as reporters chased shadows and executives waited anxiously for the first editions to come up.

At the Ministry offices there was a panic on. Senior staff were being brought back from the suburbs in anticipation of the demands that would be made upon them in the morning. There was much grumbling in the dormitory towns when the phones rang and men were snatched away from their dinners.

Most of them were annoyed at the unaccustomed interruption of their routine but the Minister himself had demanded their recall and there was little they could do but pull on their coats, kiss their suspicious wives goodbye and get back to the darkened offices of Whitehall.

At nine o'clock that evening the Prime Minister summoned the Minister and the heads of Department to Downing Street and gave the newspapers their first clue of the evening. Within a matter of minutes, reporters were ringing through to the Ministry Press Office asking for the duty man's home number, checking to back up their assumptions that there was a link between Sunday's rabies story and the sudden activity in Downing Street. But both the Chief Information Officer and the duty man who worked from home in the evenings were on their way into Whitehall and couldn't be reached – not that they knew anything anyway; the story had by-passed them. A number of reporters tried

Lambert Diggery's number on the off-chance he might know something, but there was no reply from 'The Gables' and as the evening wore on it became obvious that no more clues were forthcoming.

The Prime Minister was in an aggressive mood, his dinner with one of the more agreeable ambassadors having been interrupted. He wanted to know why, with all the publicity and precautions, such a thing could have happened. But the Minister, in turn, was in no mood to be snapped at.

'Look John,' he said sharply. 'We have said all along that one smuggled pet could start an outbreak. Remember the damned posters: "One selfish act could bring rabies permanently into the country." '

'The problem now is to discover how far it has spread.' Privately he put a curse on the head of Lambert Diggery and considered that it would be natural justice if the man was to go down with the disease in the morning.

'I thought,' said the P.M.,' that it spread only a few miles a year or something. Isn't that the case? In France or somewhere?' He was at his most exasperating, using his old ploy of playing naive, just to test people out. Patiently the Minister explained.

'If it's known to be endemic and the population realises it is in the country then movement of animals can be restricted,' he said 'and anyone who is bitten knows to go to their doctor immediately. In this way they know all about the spread and can keep it under control. But when the damned thing has gone undetected for over three months . . .' he paused for effect, 'well, good Lord, it doesn't take much imagination. . . .'

One of the Department Heads coughed politely and asked what they would say regarding a possible broadcast.

'What broadcast?' asked the P.M.

The Minister took up the point. 'They want to know if you will make a statement about the need not to panic.'

The P.M. pondered for a moment. 'Do you think it wise?'

The Minister shrugged. 'Normally I would say no. Counter-productive. It would do more harm than good if we had it under control and if it were localised. But as we don't know where it will turn up next, I think a statement would be a good idea.'

'Very well. Issue it, in my name. And perhaps one of us might think of going on television tomorrow if things get worse.'

With that he rose and returned to dinner.

When the first editions arrived in the rival offices, a common groan could be heard throughout Fleet Street and reporters were ordered to catch up fast; but no one could find Joan Diggery. She had been taken to a quiet hotel so that she would not be bothered with the inevitable questions that would follow the story. No one could find her husband either but already a message had been flashed across to the Interpol offices in Brussels: the first shift of a twenty-four hour watch on a block in the city centre had begun and the visitors to Monique's apartment were being monitored.

The Detective Inspector who had been sent to interview Lambert Diggery had been astonished by his story. In the traditional manner of men caught up in crookery, Diggery had broken and told everything, clearing his conscience by confession; and when he was led away to meet his solicitor, the tears which came to his eyes owed much to a feeling of relief.

Early next morning in the farmhouse near the Cheshire hunt stables, the young wife of the farmer was up with the dawn doing her chores. When she had finished, she brought

a cup of tea to her husband but he wouldn't take it, holding up his hand and shaking his head.

'It's not poison you know,' she said cheerily but he slumped back on the bed, still shaking his head. As she left the room she wondered how long this would last. They had said at the hospital after they had taken out his appendix that he was a big, strong man and would be back in the fields in no time. But he was showing no sign of improvement. She decided that if he were no better by evening she would call in the doctor. Having made her decision, she left the house, shouting to him that she was going shopping.

She drove carefully to the village and bought her groceries, packed them in the boot of the car and walked to the tobacconist's to get her cigarettes and the newspaper. The lady behind the counter said she was lucky; it was the last copy and it was a terrible thing to happen. The man Diggery should be shot, she reckoned. The farmer's wife mumbled at her as she idly gazed at the front page picture of Joan Diggery and the words :

'An Andrew Stern Exclusive.'

At first she didn't quite understand it with the shopkeeper chattering in her ear about rabies being almost as bad as the foot and mouth; and it wasn't until she got to the centre pages where the symptoms were listed that she began to scream.

When the clerical staff arrived at the Ministry offices, they discovered that overnight a new switchboard had been installed to deal with the enquiries from town and county councils about the contingency plans. Temporary staff had been hired from an agency and they spent the morning taking down requests for muzzles and syringes and feeding tins, and quicklime to dispose of the bodies of strays that wouldn't be claimed by their owners. The secretaries noted the urgent questions from offices throughout the country

and told the frantic callers that they would be informed as soon as possible.

It was an enormous task and the Minister hadn't slept that night. He had to turn the country into one enormous kennel in a matter of days and he knew it was impossible. Someone close to him made a joke about closing the door after the dog had bolted, but no one laughed.

In Fleet Street, staffmen and stringers were briefed to look for follow-up stories and by early afternoon they were flooding the desks of the news editors.

Old women were tearfully abandoning their dogs and cats in parks and by the side of the roads. An earl offered his services and those of his hounds to round up and dispose of foxes wherever necessary and official bodies were issuing statements warning people against the possibility of vigilante groups being set up. But already, gangs of youths had formed themselves into dog-chasing packs and at first it was easy for them because the animals they hunted thought it was all just a game, until the bricks and the bottles began to fly.

Soon the hospitals began to plead for sanity as men, women and children turned up at Casualty claiming to have been scratched and bitten and demanding treatment; by the time Andrew Stern was wakened with the trilling of the telephone in his ear, things were getting out of hand.

Stern had missed all the activity. When he left Franklin's office he went straight home. He couldn't be bothered drinking with his colleagues; he simply wanted to lie down and sleep. He had called Dorothy twice during the evening but she was out. And so he had gone to the off-licence and bought himself a bottle of Scotch.

He fumbled with the receiver as it persisted in breaking through his sleep and he croaked out a good morning.

It was the features editor, alternately flattering and apologising :

'Certainly stirred things up Andy . . . sorry to wake you . . . the Ed. wants you to help us out . . .'

'Come on mate,' Stern wheezed. 'I don't do adjectives.'

'It's all right. We're sending young Sheila down to the rabies town and the Ed. wants you to show her round and hold her hand. She'll do the words . . .'

'Bloody hell.'

'It's the Editor's request Andy. She'll be over to pick you up in half an hour.'

Stern cursed and threw the phone across the room. He lay back thinking of getting dressed, before he realised he was still fully clad from the night before – even his shoes. He closed his eyes and sighed, wishing the world would leave him alone.

Sheila was a pretty young features writer who cursed a lot to show she was tough. She chattered non-stop as she drove down the motorway, Stern lying hunched in the passenger seat, shivering.

'Go on then,' she was saying. 'How did you get it?'

'Charm,' he said, yawning.

'You were giving the wife one, weren't you?'

Stern grunted. 'What exactly do they want anyway?'

'Oh, you know, "The Town Where Fear Lay Hidden". That sort of thing.'

'Jesus.'

They drove in silence for a while and Stern felt the nausea begin to build in his throat as they approached the exit, from the motorway.

'It's Latin for madness, you know, rabies,' he said.

'Really?' Sheila sounded genuinely interested.

'Yeh. And a fox can travel twelve miles a day with it.'

'I see.'

Stern directed her into town and suggested they take a

look at the hospital first. As Sheila swung her car into a space she gazed around her. 'Is this unusually busy then?' she asked.

'Dunno,' said Stern. 'Never been here before.' He heaved himself out of the car and pointed to the main door. 'Lead on. It's your party.'

Sheila gave her name at Reception and asked to see the Hospital Secretary. The receptionist sniffed and demanded to know which paper she was from. When she told her, the woman looked up quickly and stared over the girl's shoulder to where Stern sat slumped in a chair. 'Then you'd be Mr. Stern?' she asked.

'The very same.'

'Yes, we've been trying to reach you,' she said coming out from behind her desk. 'Would you follow me please.'

Stern got to his feet and shuffled after the woman with Sheila at his heels. The receptionist turned as she reached the lift. 'Just you, Mr. Stern,' she said. He feebly protested but the woman had her instructions, she said, and as the lift doors closed he could see the frustration on Sheila's face, a frustration which would shortly turn to anger.

He was led through a corridor to a heavy oak door marked 'Hospital Secretary' and when he was introduced, he recognised the tall man from the television news programme.

'Ah, Mr. Stern,' he held out his hand. 'We saw your, ah, scoop this morning.' The man gave a weak smile and Stern grinned back at him. 'We try to please,' he said.

'Quite. Now would you be good enough to follow me please?'

Again Stern was led through corridors and down a flight of stairs, the Secretary explaining as they walked: 'I must tell you that we have another patient recently admitted and I am going to give you the name on condition you won't use it in your newspaper.'

'I'm not sure I can give that assurance,' said Stern as they approached a young doctor standing by a closed door.

As he was being introduced to the young man, he repeated that he wasn't in a position to guarantee anonymity and at first he did not recognise the voice calling his name: 'Andy, is that you . . .?'

The doctor looked at him and Stern could hear the sympathy in his voice, telling him he was dreadfully sorry, as Stern pushed past him and lunged at the door just as another spasm jerked Dorothy upward and out of the arms of the nurses.

Briefly they stared at each other, before the virus spun the girl backwards again onto the bed and the door swung gently back on its hinges as the doctor pulled Stern away.

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